

THE FINAL SEAS OF 2015: Baltic, Mediterranean and Tyrrhenian

This is the third and final chapter of ten weeks of travel from the end of July to early October 2015.

Before returning to France (Provence and Corsica) I made a detour to Tallinn on the Baltic Sea to spend a few days with friends who were traveling in Scandinavia. Tallinn is very popular with tourists (2000 from a cruise ship AIDA and even from Dubai the first day of our visit) and

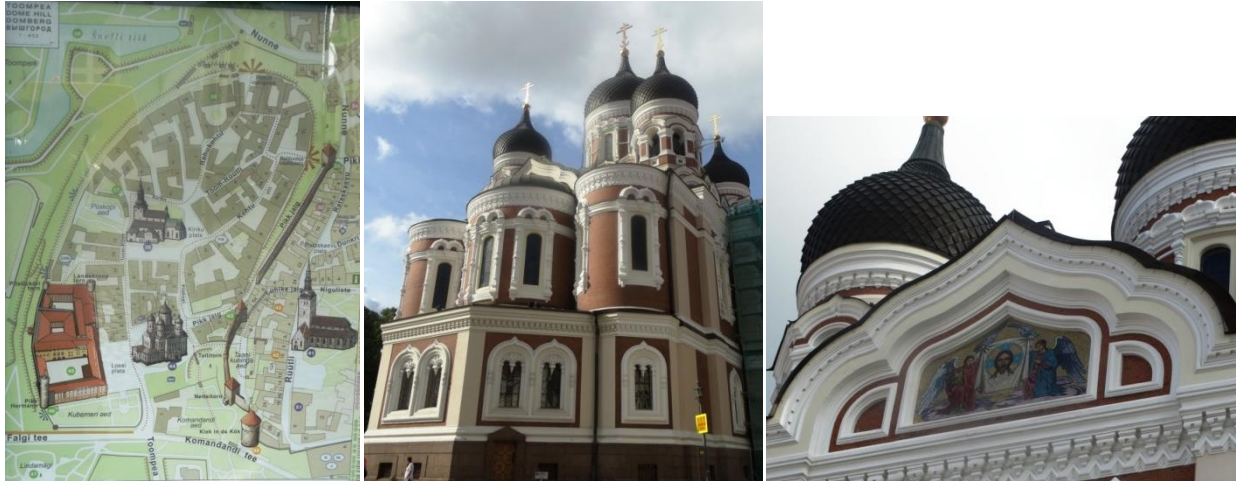


understandably so. The old town (upper and lower) are a beautifully restored (some restoration still underway) Medieval City.

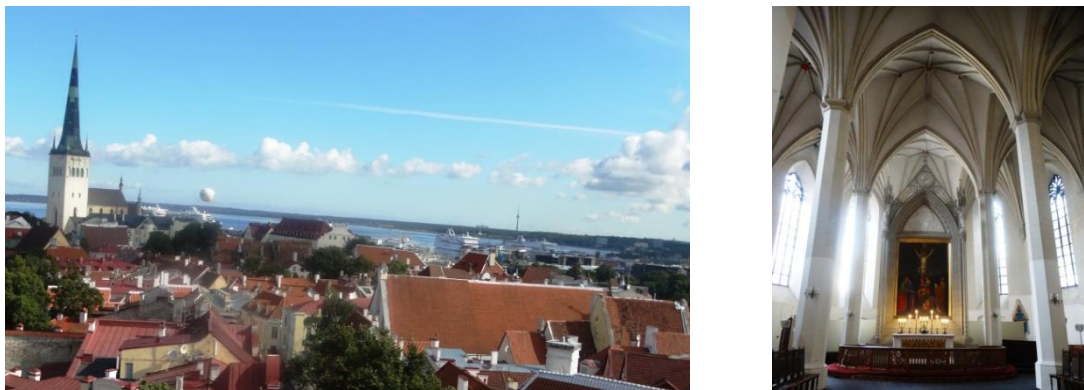


My visit started a bit rockily when I arrived at our rental apartment only to realize that I had left my passport at the airport in a ladies' room! I immediately took a taxi back to the airport but didn't find the passport. I talked with the airport police and they said they would call me if they found it, which, miraculously an hour or so later they did! So back to the airport to collect it during which time my friends had prepared a gourmet dinner of pasta with smoked salmon!

I spent the first morning exploring Toompea, the castle hill where are found the Russian Orthodox Cathedral Alexander Nevsky as well as the Cathedral of St Mary of the Virgin, the main Lutheran Cathedral of Estonia. According to EU statistics, Estonia is the least religious country in the EU with only 14% of people identifying religion as an important part of their daily lives.



On the other hand, the churches in Tallinn are among the most significant buildings to visit. St Olaf Church's (now Baptist) steeple at ~125 meters in 1549 was one of the tallest structures in the world until it burned down in 1625 but was rebuilt.



When I visited Holy Spirit Lutheran Church dating from the 13th C (the oldest Lutheran Church in Tallinn and known for the 17th C clock on its façade and intricate interior carvings) the organist and violinist were practicing for a concert later that evening, so I enjoyed a private concert.



The Dome church (officially St Mary's) was the main church of the German speaking aristocracy and is filled with coats of arms.

One of Tallinn's highlights is the Danse Macabre painting by Lubeck master Bernt Notke, which depicts the transience of life, the skeletal figures of Death taking along the mighty as well as the feeble. *Danse Macabre* or *The Dance of Death* was a popular medieval motif in art. Only the initial fragment of the original 30 meters (98.4 ft) wide painting (accomplished at the end of the 15th century) has been preserved and is currently displayed in the rebuilt St Nicholas' Church, now serving as a museum.



After being part of Danish and other Scandinavian Kingdoms and the Russian Empire, Estonia was briefly an independent country from 1920 to 1939 before Nazi and Soviet rule until independence again in 1991. During the Soviet era ethnic Russians and Ukrainians were moved into the country and Estonians moved out, so that even today Tallinn is 40% ethnic Russian and the country as a whole about 25%. During this era the TV tower allowed Estonians to access Finnish and western world programming.

Singing is a national form of expression with the first song festival taking place in 1869 and continuing every five years since. In 1987, there began a cycle of mass demonstrations featuring spontaneous singing of national songs and hymns that were strictly forbidden during the Soviet occupation. On 11 September 1988, a massive song festival called "Song of Estonia" was held at the Tallinn Song Festival Arena. This time nearly 300,000 people came together, more than a quarter of all Estonians. Then on August 23rd 1989, the fiftieth anniversary of the secret Hitler/Stalin pact dividing Eastern Europe in spheres of influence, 2 million Baltic residents joined hands forming a 420 mile human chain through all three countries from Tallinn to Riga to Vilnius, and sang patriotic songs. Within seven months Lithuania became the first of the three countries to declare its independence. These events came to be known as The Singing Revolution.

On our second day we decided to take the tram to the edge of Tallinn to Kadriorg (meaning Catherine's Valley in Estonian) Park where are found a summer palace built by Russian Tsar Peter (the Great) for Tsarina Catherine which now houses mostly Russian and Dutch art with a lovely adjacent formal garden, then adjacent is the current President's residence, and finally



the KUMU art museum designed by Finnish architect Pekka Vapaavuori built from 2003 to 2006 and housing Estonian art from the 18th C onwards. All are worthy of a visit plus time strolling in the 70 hectare park and dining in the restaurant at KUMU.



The tram route passed some very interesting residential areas with wooden buildings reminiscent of the Arts and Crafts school of the U.S.

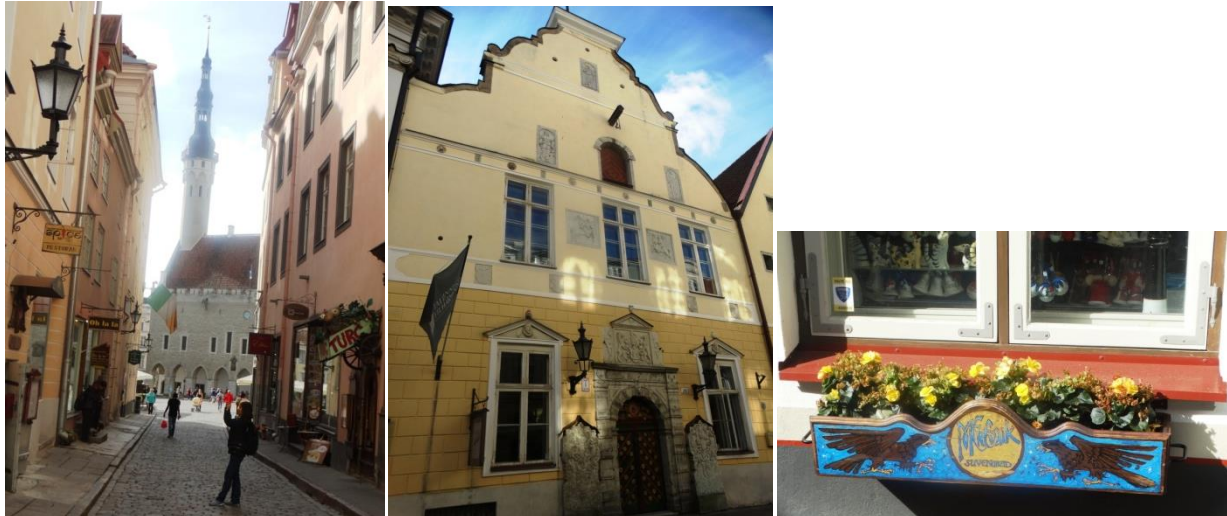




As we were exiting the old town through the Viru gate we were at a quite large flower market. As it was the first day of school, many children were buying flowers for their new teachers – a charming custom!



Just strolling the streets of Tallinn is a real pleasure. The guild and merchant houses have



varied architecture and many can be visited. The gardens just outside the walls and the walls and towers themselves are impressive. Many are currently residences. I should also mention that art galleries abound, this is a center for sales of amber jewelry, and many restaurants serve

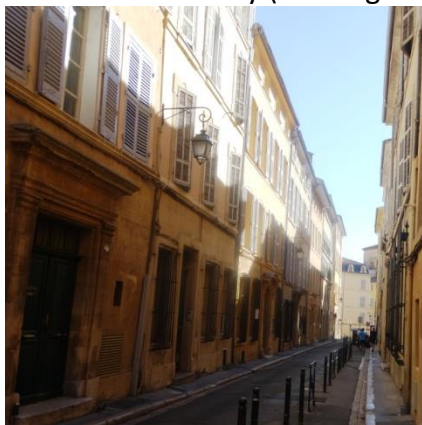
truly gourmet creative dishes. If you can schedule your visit for a time when there are not



several large cruise ships in port it would be a plus!

I do want to praise Turkish Airlines which was my carrier for all the many legs of this trip except to Corsica. The staff was always helpful, the economy seats had plenty of leg room, a checked bag was included in my fare and the food on the flights was actually good, not just good for airplane food! Also regarding Tallinn Airport the departure lounges had the most varied and comfortable seating (including bean bags) of any airport I've been to in the world!

Onwards home to France with ten days in Provence followed by a week in Corsica. Aix en Provence was an excellent first base, a very dynamic city (40,000 university students assure this!) with excellent train and bus connections in the region. The Old Town is very interesting with a medieval city (winding narrow streets anchored by the Mairie, 16th C clock tower and



Cathedral) separated from the 17th C Mazarin quartier (laid out in a grid) by the Cours Mirabeau, a 440 meter long by 42 meter wide tree-lined boulevard that replaced the former city wall and was purpose-built for the nobles to show off their grandeur (ordinary citizens were not even permitted to walk on it!). The handsome buildings were built of a lovely ochre colored stone until the quarry was exhausted in 1895. Pre-dating the Mazarin district, the Church of

Saint John of Malta (I've been running into these guys every trip since June) was built in the 13th C, the first Gothic church in Provence, and thus was outside the walls so they built their own fortification.



Street signs are in both Provençal language (a blend of Catalan and Latin) and French. Provence was semi-independent, ruled by the Counts of Provence until its count died without an heir so it passed to his nephew who was the King of France thus becoming part of France in 1486.

There are literally hundreds of fountains throughout the city, some spouting the waters of the thermal springs. One tour guide pointed out that the rims of most of the fountains were quite low to the ground, the reason being that sheep and goats passed through here en route to their summer pastures in the Alps and so able to drink. I have to confirm next time I am in northern France that the fountains there have higher rims because it is cows that passing through to have a drink!



The Cathedral Sainte Sauveur was built over the Roman Forum dating from Aix's founding in 122 BC. The first section is a 5th C AD baptismal pool (~6 feet deep) surrounded by 1st C columns. Various sections were built in Romanesque, then Gothic then Baroque styles. The very contemporary altar dates from 1999. At the concert we attended it required three people to play the 18th C organ.

Cathédrale Sainte Sauveur the Roman Forum dating from 122 BC. The first section is a 5th C AD baptismal pool (~6 feet deep) surrounded by 1st C columns. Various sections were built in Romanesque, then Gothic then Baroque styles. The very contemporary altar dates from 1999.



Paul Cezanne lived in Aix as a child and then late in life he bought a lovely wooded property up the hill from the thermal baths with a view of Mont Sainte Victoire that he often painted. No photos are allowed inside the atelier but it has a north facing window wall (artists' favorite light), the arrangements for some of his still life's and a special door cut into the exterior wall through which his giant canvases could be lowered. He painted the famous painting Grand Bathers here where he spent the last four years of his working life.

There are many museums in Aix, but I particularly enjoyed the Granet, both the original one

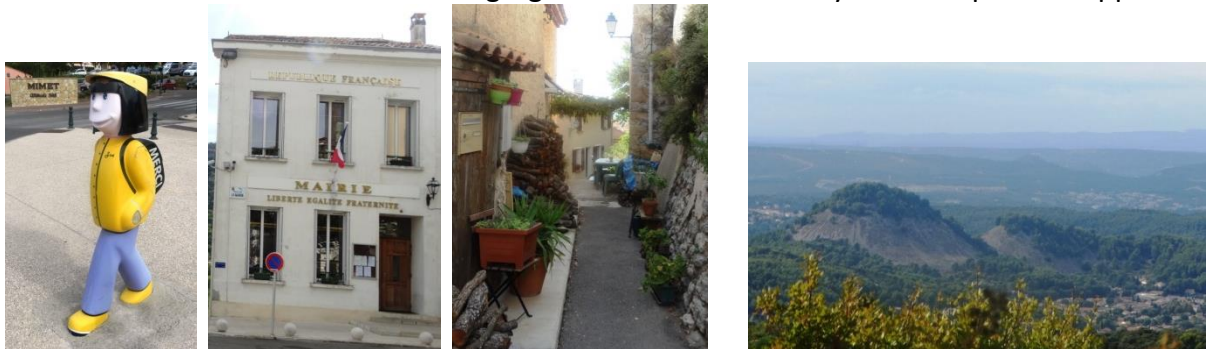


and the 20th C collection in a converted church.

Local bus rides took us to picturesque (and definitely not touristic) towns/villages of Peynier

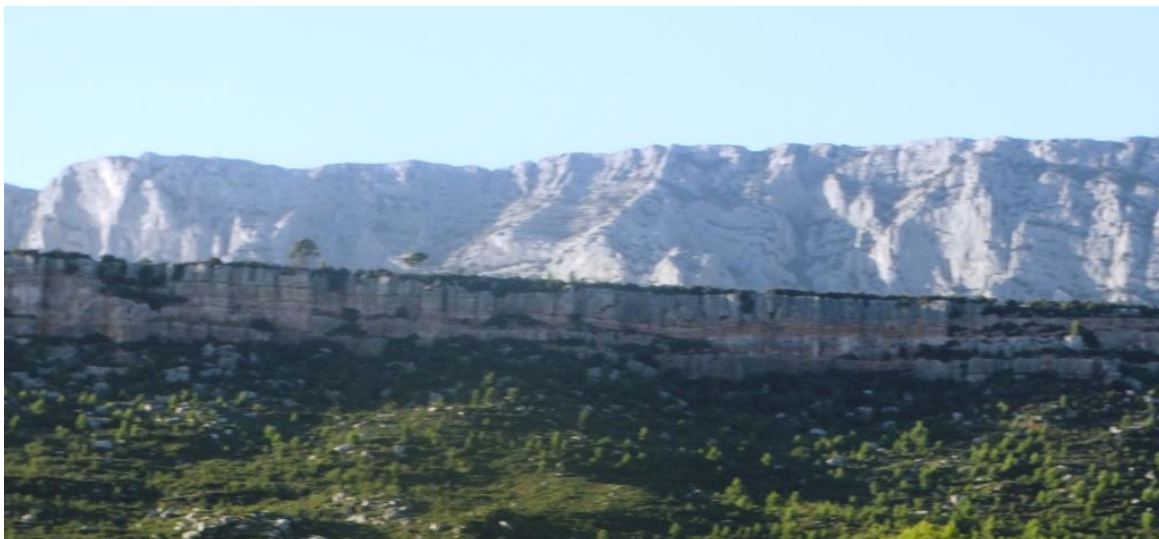


and Mimet. I loved the school crossing signs in Mimet and once you walk up to the upper town



there are some excellent views.

Sainte Baume is a rock massif of about 1000 meters in elevation that runs in an east/west direction in this area of Provence. It is very dramatic.



Aix has a lovely new bus terminal complete with a “living” wall and I enjoyed the personal message on the bus (translated means I am not in service) which somehow seemed to typify



the friendly casualness of the south of France.

Another day we went to Marseille which has changed a lot since my last visit in January, 2010 with a new plaza at the Vieux Port harbor, enclosure of the multipurpose football stadium, and redevelopment including new museums around the Cathedral which is 19th C Roman Byzantine



style. (We did, of course go up the hill to visit Notre Dame de la Garde and I had forgotten just how much gold was in this church!).



We walked the back to St. handsomest in



very artsy 2nd arrondissement en route Charles train station, to me one of the France.

Cassis is an easy day trip by bus from Aix. The liqueur Cassis (for however, comes not from this region but from Dijon in Burgundy. This tiny port town is famous for its calanques, inlets into the rocky Mediterranean coastline that are favorites among hikers as well as kayakers and rock climbers. Before lunch we took an easy walk to calanque Port Miou which is a very long and skinny boat moorage.



day trip by bus from Aix. The liqueur Cassis (for however, comes not from this region but from Dijon in Burgundy. This tiny port town is famous for its



Then after a fabulous lunch of mussels (about 20 different choices of preparation at restaurant Don Camilla) we took an hour long boat tour, seeing kayakers, climbers and more calanques such as Port-Pin and En Vau with its secluded beach.

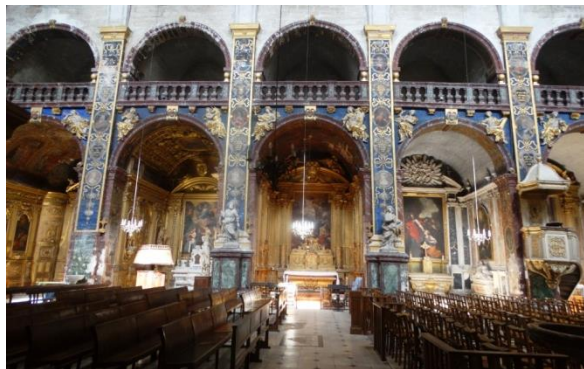


We did rent a car to transport four of us and our luggage from Aix to Isle sur la Sorgue. This lovely town, famous for its antique dealers, is as its name suggests, an island surrounded by various branches of the Sorgue River and canals (about 25 km from Avignon).



The island itself

has an impressive Baroque church, Collegiale de Notre Dame des Anges. Also Campredon Centre d'Arts at the time of our visit had an enjoyable history of photography exhibition. I also found a good variety of avant-garde art.



A nice 1.5 km walk takes you to where the river splits and there you see the small elevation drops (~ 1 foot) that occur throughout the network and for which the local flat bottomed boats were designed.





At one time a crayfish industry thrived in Isle sur la Sorgue and many waterwheels remain from the subsequent silk and paper plants.

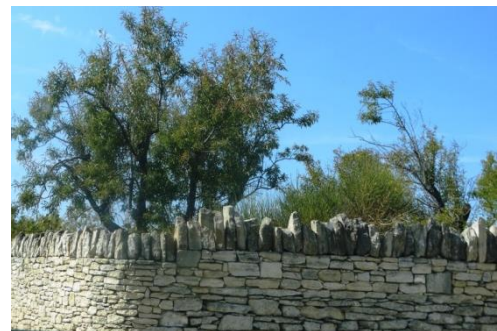
On this visit I finally saw my first lavender fields, although of course not in bloom in September.



In the same vicinity is the hill town of Gordes, built entirely of stone and well known as a center of the Resistance during WWII. Nearby is the Village of Bories, used from the 17th to 19th centuries to house people, animals and crops. These fascinating vaulted structures are made from local stone without mortar, and were discovered in ruins in the 1960's and restored over an 8 year period.



Throughout this region we also noted unique walls with vertical stones on top which serve two purposes, to add weight to the mortar-less stone walls and to keep animals away from the crops.



Another interesting site in this area is Pont du Gard, a portion of the 50 km long aqueduct which provided water to the city of Nimes for 500 years and subsequently served as a toll bridge across the Gardon river for another thousand years. At 50 meters in height it was the tallest in the Roman world.

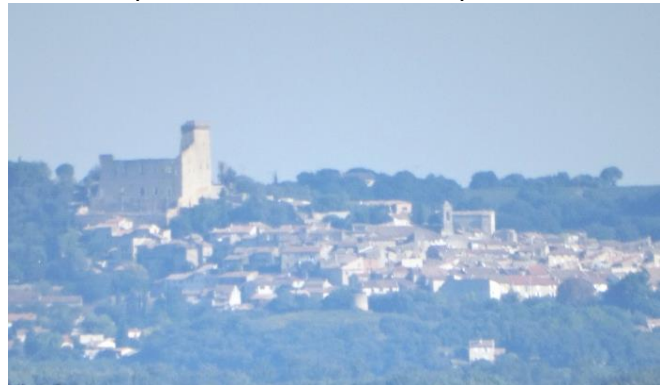
Near the aqueduct a memorial to victims world wide of terrorism, an olive tree of peace, was planted in January 2015 after the Charlie Hebdo and other terrorist attacks in Paris.



We stopped briefly at Chateauneuf du Pape where there are vineyards everywhere. The vendange (harvest) was going on so none of the chateaux were open for tasting. We did learn



however that the AOC requires hand harvesting of the grapes and up to 14 grape varieties are permitted in the blend. Across the Rhone and in the haze, the village of Chateauneuf du Pape was visible 12 km from the ramparts of the Palais des Papes when we visited Avignon



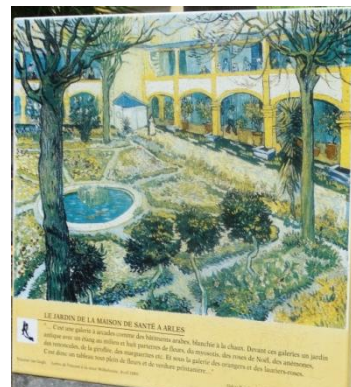
as were the walled town of Villeneuve lez Avignon Fort St Andre and Mt. Ventoux, at 1917 meters another Provençal natural landmark. I took a photo of the famous bridge, but I didn't dance on it.



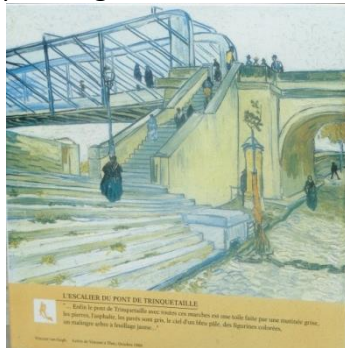
I preferred Arles, with its more human scale architecture, to Avignon. I was, however, surprised to learn that bullfights take place in the arena, across the street from which we had an excellent lunch.



Arles was the home of Vincent Van Gogh from 1888 to 1889, including a stay at the hospital Ancien Hotel Dieu (after severing his left ear) and he painted more than 300 paintings in Arles.

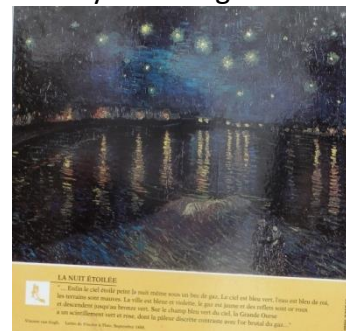
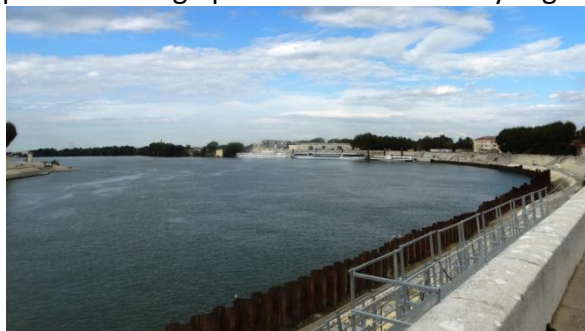


It was fun to visit the subject locations, which were identified with reproductions of the paintings. At the staircase to the bridge de Trinquetaille you see a very young tree in the



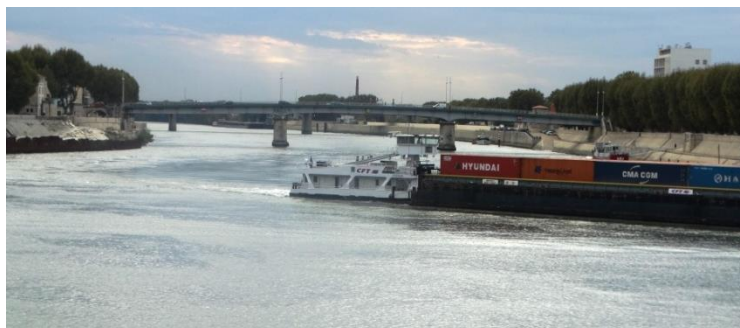
painting which is now over a century old!

The Rhone makes a big bend at the edge of Arles and new re-enforced concrete embankments are being installed. You can see lions guarding the entrances to the former bridge from which point Van Gogh painted another Starry Night painting looking over the city with its gas



lamps.

Probably another reason I liked Arles is because I really enjoy watching commercially active rivers. Also many other Roman ruins remain in Arles including a theater and an excellent Antiquities Museum.



We flew from Marseilles to Bastia on Corsica, spending only the night before boarding the small modern train to Calvi on the northwest coast. The Moor's head that we were to see throughout the island became the symbol of Corsica in the mid 1700's. The rain of an approaching storm

was already falling and many long distance hikers got on the train at Ile Rousse where we



reached the west coast (and a ferry goes to Nice) and turned south. When we arrived in Calvi we spent a nice afternoon (after an outstanding gourmet lunch) wandering this small port town. A 15th C Genoese Citadelle dominates the harbor with massive bastions protecting it on



all four sides.

Inside the Citadel the Oratoire St-Antoine which was the meeting place of confraternities (sort of like today's service clubs) contrasts in its simplicity with the Cathedral. In the heart of the lower city the rose colored Baroque church Ste-Marie-Majeure contains an example of the statues that are often paraded in religious processions,





common practice throughout Corsica.

There is a legend, but no corroborating evidence, that Christopher Columbus actually came from Calvi (which was part of Genoa at the time of his birth).

The rain became very heavy overnight with high winds accompanying it. I remember thinking I was happy to be on land and not on a cruise ship. When we went to the train station the next morning for our train to Ajaccio we were loaded onto buses instead. When we reached Ponte-Leccio, the intersection point of the rail system, it became clear there was a problem. There was no train and none expected. There were buses stranded there. It seems during the storms overnight mudslides had blocked both the road and the railroad. After several hours (fortunately there was a small café in the station, but nothing else in the vicinity), there was still no word as to when/if transport would open up again. We could see extensive flooding right at that location. So our only viable option was to take the bus



back to Calvi.





It turns out there are storms called Medicanes, a combination word from Mediterranean and Hurricane and we were in the midst of one. It covered an area from Sicily through Sardinia and Corsica and was headed to Nice. Although the

winds didn't quite reach the Medicane threshold (they topped out at about 90 kph), the levels of rain that fell caused massive flash flooding. So, when we returned to Calvi we had to find a way to continue our trip. The plan had been to enjoy the dramatic scenery of the mountainous spine of Corsica by rail, thus avoiding the dangerous roads. In the end the surest bet was to fly from Calvi to Nice, have lunch at the airport and take a flight from Nice to Bonifacio (Corsica) which is what we did the next day.



In the meantime we had a truly splendid dinner of sanglier accompanied by local musicians (I think the very special Corsican songs called paghjella sung by three to five men) and their families in a restaurant in Calvi. We actually got very lucky the next day. We flew to Nice, had a nice lunch in the airport restaurant and could definitely see a bank of clouds coming our way. But our flight did depart, and flew somewhat bumpily to Bonifacio. The resulting storm that hit Nice and the Riviera resulted in massive flooding and 17 deaths! The Nice airport was closed not long after our departure and didn't re-open until early the next day.

Bonifacio is another hill town with a citadel, this one Genoese-fortified in the 13th C with modern military structures added in the 16th C after the invention of gunpowder.



On our first evening we viewed a lovely light show on the rampart walls from our hotel down at the Marina level.



We took the one hour boat ride out from the harbor where you view the medieval houses perched on the edge, including a breakaway rock known for sand, caves, and the descend the cliff face to a good drinking water. across the strait only 12 km away.

ride out from the harbor dramatic cliffs with on the edge, including a some reason as grain of stairway whose 187 steps well used historically for Sardinia can be seen



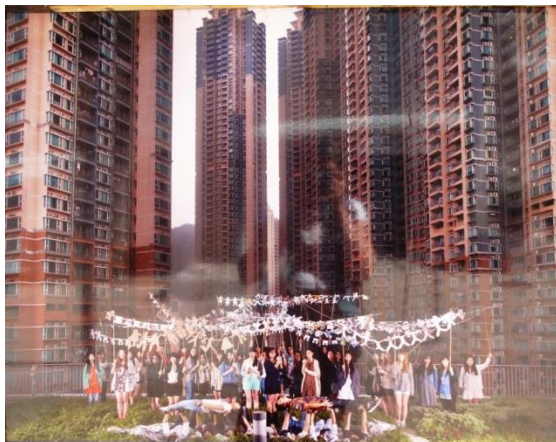
There are marine reserves in this area and we saw amazingly clear water with lots of fish when on our boat ride as well as many caves.





I had realized that Club Med 2 (the boat I was on three weeks earlier in Greece) was in Corsica when I saw her anchored off Calvi as we were leaving (the morning after the storm), so she had been at sea during the storm! And then there she was anchored off Bonifacio (having spent the day in between in Ajaccio which we never did). I asked one of the crew who was staffing the launch drop off point (he was new to the boat from when I was on it) how it was during the storm – his one word reply dur (hard or tough).

A special treat was an exhibition of 60 photos by Floriane de Lasse around the subject of How Much Can You Carry (in the sense of physical weight, family and community responsibilities, as well as spiritual traditions, from her travels in Africa, Asia the Pacific and Latin America) hung



along the streets of town.



The Final Seas of 2015

We ate extremely well in Bonifacio with fish dishes prepared in local sauces, including raye, and more sanglier which I love. For breakfast I had my coffee and croissant at a café on the harbor next to a local fisherman selling his morning's catch which locals were coming to buy directly from his boat.



We took a day trip to visit Casteddu de Tappa, neolithic fortified buildings from about 1500 BC. It was difficult to find as it is preserved on private property with little signage, but it gave us a chance to see some countryside with views to the dramatic rock mountainous Corsican interior.



We also stopped at Porto-Vecchio for lunch which turned out to be fun as the 5 day Corsican Historic car rally was to start that afternoon and the cars were assembling and finalizing their credentials. The Porsches especially brought back memories of sports car rallying. I'm sure the twisty mountainous roads of Corsica are great sport!



Although Porto-Vecchio was founded in the 16th C to fill a defensive gap along the eastern Corsican coast between Bastia and Bonifacio, it was also known for its salt mines and cork industry. However, the marshes caused it to be plagued by malaria for centuries and it wasn't until after WWII that land reclamation paved the way for tourism and commerce with its numerous nearby lovely beaches.

The last stop in Corsica was Aleria which began as a Greek outpost in the 6th C BC and later was invaded by the Romans, some of whose ruins can be seen today. By the 5th C AD however it was abandoned due to the increase of malaria. The current museum of archeology centers on a Genoese fort built in 1484 and the church Eglise St Marcel dates from the 19th C when it was built substantially from the stones of its 12th C predecessor.



There is much, much, more to be seen and experienced in Corsica, especially for hardy hikers and rock climbers, but I am glad to have had my first taste of this dramatic and beautiful island.