

A Pilgrimage in France on the Rhone and Soane Rivers 2026

In July I embarked on a week-long Catholic pilgrimage In France on the Rhone and Soane rivers with my daughter Leanne and two of her friends. In combination with the Pilgrimage the itinerary featured wine tasting and art/history of this region. The primary facilitators were Drs Liz Lev (historian) and Thomas Williams (sommelier) and Fr Mike Schmitz of Minnesota. We were also accompanied by newly ordained priest Stephen Parker and a Monseigneur. We celebrated mass daily in a church at each of our stops. The group of 130 pilgrims filled the entire boat and three coaches each day. Other than Liz and Thomas who live in Rome I might have been the only person living outside the US.

The S. S. Catherine has a regular week-long itinerary from Arles to Lyon with periodic



second week extensions to Paris. I had never done a river cruise in Europe before and this boat well deserves a 5* rating. Although we paid premium fares for the pilgrimage and all-inclusive itinerary, it is clear that the food and service on board

are of exceptional quality.

My daughter and friend arrived in Paris a few days ahead and scheduled a whirlwind of visits including the Renoir exhibit at Musee d'Orsay, a concert at Sante Chapelle, mass at Notre Dame, and Monet and Henri Rousseau at Orangerie. We also managed dinner/music at Chez Papa jazz club, lunch at La Samaritaine Voyage and some shopping.

We then took the TGV to Marseille for a two-day visit. The first day we viewed the city from a hop on hop off bus and visited the Basilica de Notre Dame de la Garde.

The basilica was constructed by the Protestant architect Henri-Jacques-Espérandieu in a roman-byzantine style and consecrated in 1864. It is built on the remains of a prior fort from 1536. The lower level contains a crypt and the upper church is decorated with mosaics.





The clock tower is topped by a 35-foot-tall statue of the Virgin Mary and child from copper and gold leaf. The views are, of course, magnificent.

We then spent a leisurely full day on a small boat (12 people) in the Parc Nationale des Calanques off Marseilles. Since my daughter's friend is an artist she was eager to capture the area in some small watercolor paintings.

This vast protected area includes the Archipel de Frioul just offshore from Marseille, all the way to Saint Cyr, about 40 km to the east and out to 12 miles offshore. The entire area is mapped for access, fishing, bathing and other activities including some terrestrial areas. Our captain was very attentive to the regulations or risked his and the boat's licenses!

The landscape is rugged and the coast includes everything from caves to sandy beaches. We stopped at a couple of areas where swimming was allowed.



Sunday morning of July 12 we joined the pilgrimage group at Marseille airport and were bused to Arles. While enjoying a wide variety of hors d'oeuvres we learned that this area was the first in France to be occupied by the Romans and they brought viticulture with them to the fertile Provençal land.

We celebrated mass in the beautiful 12th C Saint Trophine Church in Arles. Walking back to the boat, we passed this memorial to the Charlie Hebdo terrorist attack.



Arles is where Vincent Van Gogh joined his brother Theodore after suffering many setbacks. The bulk of his output occurred during his years there.

Here are Arles and the point from which he painted Starry Night.



Each evening we were briefed on the next day's visits. Setting the stage for the pilgrimage we learned that in the 1st C when the Apostles were still alive, France became the "Eldest daughter" of the Catholic Church.

On Monday we had a very early start to visit the small town of St Remy de Provence with an hour to enjoy the town. I found the small street where the astrologer Notredamus was born.

The doors have an unusual pattern.

I learned that due to the dryness of the summer and threat of fire, all 14 juillet fireworks have been cancelled.

We travelled a short distance to Montmajour Abbey. A Benedictine community was



founded here in the 10th C. As owners of a piece of the True Cross it became a place of pilgrimage for three centuries and brought prosperity to Arles. However from 1504 the pilgrimages were only offered every eleven years. It suffered a turbulent history was ultimately turned over to the state where it is used for cultural events.



also passed rice fields!



The hills we are passing through are called the Alpilles or little alps. They are recognizable by the distinctive color of the rock from paintings by Cezanne. We



I skipped the afternoon Arles walking tour “In the Steps of Van Gogh” having done one a few years ago in favor of some time in the pool and a nap.

We cruised to Avignon that evening and passed many ruined castles along the route.



On Tuesday we spent the morning in Avignon beginning with Mass at the Notre-Dame des Doms Basilica at the Palace of the Popes. The first French Pope was elected in 1305 and he moved the Vatican from Rome to Avignon apparently to escape the feuding among the Roman families. Between then and

1429 nine popes served based in Avignon. They added on to the Palace successively and the town grew from 4000 population to 40,00. Today the population is 90,000.



I elected not to do the climbing required to visit the palace but here is a picture of the garden (courtesy of our guide). Instead I did the tourist train visit through the town.

There are some very narrow streets and it is still a walled city.



Despite it being a holiday almost all stores were open and the town was packed with tourists. There seemed to be posters everywhere, even on the light poles!

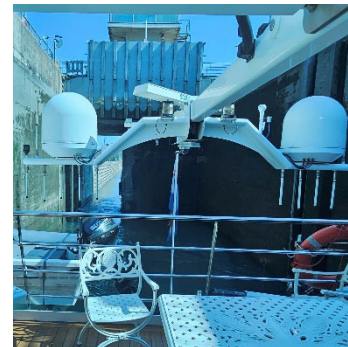


After Avignon we head to Tain l'Hermitage where we will arrive at 5 am Wednesday morning. We are going through four locks today.

In the evening I and about 30 other passengers watched

France lose 2-0 to Spain in the World Cup.

I haven't mentioned that the boat's hallways are adorned with high-quality art and the dining room has convivial pieces.



In the morning, The Rhone is totally glassy as I look across at Tournon-Sur-Rhone.



Our Lady of Assumption Church was rebuilt in 1825 on the site of a former church. It is the oldest building in town, so this is a young town! The sculpture commemorates the marriage here of the future King Charles V in 1350 to Jeanne de Bourbon. He was 12 years old. This was part of the strategy of expanding

the Kingdom through marriages.



As our bus approaches the winery we see the extensive area of these steep slope vineyards. The wine industry was started by a Knight returning from the crusades who became a hermit growing wine.

This is the Northern Rhone region, and the reds are all Syrah and the whites Viognier. From its founding in 1933 the cooperative has

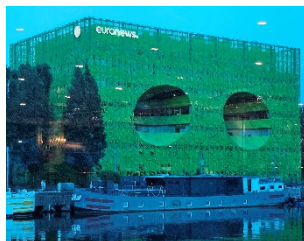
grown to 250 families each with a small plot adding up to 2500 acres. This

is hand work, no tractors can function here.

Uniworld, our ship's owner/operator was celebrating its 50th Anniversary with a special dinner that night. The dessert had gold



dust and carefully attached gold balls on each plate.



I looked out the window and noticed a familiar building. We were passing through Lyon en route further north to Macon. We are now on the Soane River.

I elected not to go to Beaune because I had been there before and had not been in Mâcon. Because of that I missed the Meursault wine tasting in the Burgundy wine region. The reds would have been pinot noir and the white chardonnay.

Mâcon has roots in the Roman era and continues to be a vibrant commercial center. The Quai Lamartine, named after poet and politician Alphonse de Lamartine from the area, is a pleasant promenade lined with pastel buildings. The bridge Saint Laurent dates from the 11th C and is one of the oldest in France.



The 15th C Maison de Blois wooden house is remarkable. The towers, most of what remains of the 11th C – 14th C Old Cathedral of Saint Vincent, were

under restoration but I did get to visit the Church of Saint Pierre.



The next day we visit the 11th C Romanesque Basilica de Sacre Coeur in Paray-le-Monial to see the architecture of Cluny. The capital carvings at the top of the columns are bizarre.



The Chapel of the Apparitions in Paray-le-Monial, the City of the Sacred Heart, is where the heart of Jesus appeared to St. Margaret Mary Alacoque in the 17th century.



After Mass we traveled to Cluny through beautiful Burgundy countryside. Charolais cattle are abundant in this region.

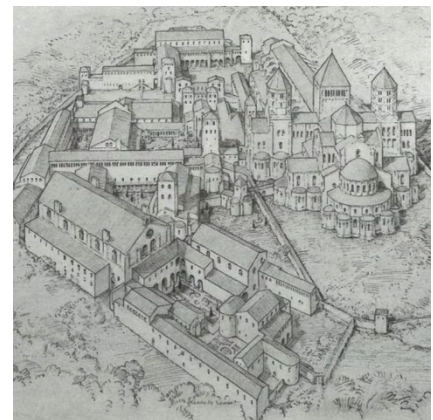


We arrived at Cluny Abbey early in the afternoon. The first monks arrived in Cluny early in the 10th C. In the 11th C the abbot Hugues de Semur undertook to build the largest church in all of Christendom called La Maior Ecclesia. At its height there were 1400 Cluny dependencies throughout Europe. The church was set within a vast complex necessary to support the 300 monks' daily life isolated from the town.

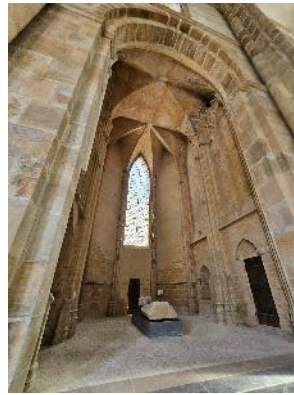
Here is a model of the church. There were 40 chapels



(round protrusions to the left) of which two remain.



This is the south arm of the grand transept, the tallest by far of medieval churches. Archeologist investigation reveal a subterranean construction intertying the gigantic columns to support the structure.



Here are one of the two remaining chapels, the Porte d'Honneur and the cloister.



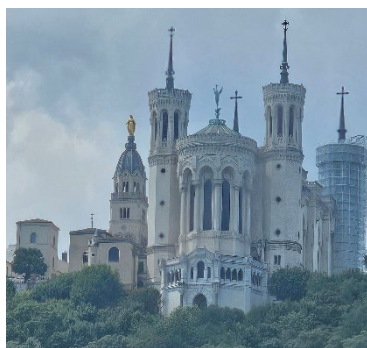
The final mass was celebrated in 1791 by the twelve remaining monks. After the French Revolution efforts were made to destroy the abbey but by 1803 they had given up. One area became a stud farm. Today an engineering school shares the space with the monuments commission visitors.

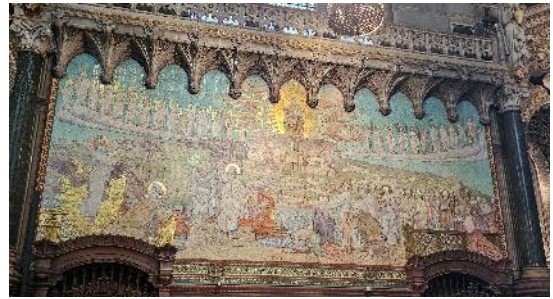


In 1928 the first investigations of the site began under the direction of American medieval architecture specialist Kenneth John Conant, financed by the Medieval Academy of America. These studies continued until 1938. The compilation of the work in 1968 became the basis for the restoration accomplished.

We arrived in Lyon about midnight.

Our final day was spent in Lyon starting with mass at the magnificent Basilica Notre Dame de Fourvière. It has a history quite similar to Sacre Coeur in Paris having been conceived and largely financed by the local community in the same time period. In 1870 the community vowed that if Mary saved Lyon from the Prussians currently threatening Paris a church would be built dedicated to her. The cornerstone was laid in 1872 and 24 years later the church was consecrated and then made a basilica by Pope Leon XIII in 1897.





I have no words to describe the interior. In this (stock photo) view, the former chapel is crowned by the gold statue of Mary.



We had a brief time to visit old town and stopped off in the Cathedral to see the astronomical clock in action at noon.

Our final activity of the trip was lunch at Le Mercier

de Passage where we were treated to a series of traditional Lyonnais



dishes.

We departed the boat early the next morning as she would be loading her next group of travelers for a return voyage to Arles. We took the train home to Paris and I wanted my

visitors to experience the historic Le Train Bleu in Gare de Lyon. It was an unfortunate ending as neither the food nor the service lived up to my expectations.



We spent the final day on Montmartre visiting Sacre Coeur, the Eglise Saint- Pierre de Montmartre next door and Place de Tertre.

We had an excellent lunch and service at the oldest restaurant on Montmartre, La Mere Catherine.

Somehow I had ordered a special chocolate mousse!

