

Home on the Rhone: River cruise reveals wild side of France

By Mark Sissons | August 4, 2017 | Updated: August 4, 2017 3:50pm



Photo: Mark Sissons, Special To The Chronicle



IMAGE 1 OF 2

The massive medieval Palais des Papes (Popes' Palace) dominates the center of Avignon, one of the stops along CroisiEurope's Rhne River cruise.



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IMAGE 2 OF 2

Known as the “European Grand Canyon,” the Gorges de l’Ardèche was formed by the Ardèche river, which snakes through it for more than 15 miles.

Galloping four abreast toward me on their creamy white steeds, they could be the Cartwrights of “Bonanza,” riding across the Ponderosa. Except that it’s not the West, it’s the South.

Of France.

I’m visiting the Arnauds, a French family of *manadières* (ranchers) who raise black bulls and ride *les cheveux blanc Camarguais*, the legendary semi-wild breed of horses native to the Camargue. This vast, marshy UNESCO protected national regional reserve — the largest river delta in Europe — drains into the Mediterranean Sea west of Marseille and south of Arles.

Here in the heart of France’s cowboy country where the violent winds of the mistral often blow, the bulls and the *manadières* roam. Among other animals.

Sipping Sable de Camargue, a sparkling local wine, on the shady porch of the rambling ranch house, patriarch Gilbert Arnaud points toward a candy-colored mirage shimmering in the distance.

“Les flamants roses,” he says: hundreds of wobbly-kneed pink flamingos. Over 20,000 breeding pairs nest each year in the Camargue’s 400 square miles of wetlands.

The family ranch and the wetlands are a wild side of France I had not expected during my voyage down the Rhone on a riverboat, between Lyon and the Mediterranean. In a part of the world known more for lavender, wine and refined cuisine (and writers who spend a year here), we’re finding cowboys, canals, Roman ruins and, apparently, flamingos.

The leisurely pace of riding on the river matches the laid-back culture and landscape — and has been ideal for having time to absorb the region’s surprises.

The five-day journey into the heart of France’s wild southeast begins as I board the Camargue, a recently refurbished two deck, 148-passenger vessel operated by CroisiEurope. France’s second longest river — and the country’s only one that empties into the Mediterranean — the 504-mile-long Rhone has been an important inland waterway since Greek and Roman times. It used to regularly flood its banks, wreaking widespread death and destruction.



Photo: Mark Sissons, Special To The Chronicle



Refurbished in 2015, the MS Camargue accommodates just 104 passengers and sails from Lyon along the Rhone and Saone rivers.

Today, a series of dams and locks — some as deep at 75 feet — make for smooth sailing as it flows through the western edge of Provence, France’s gastronomic and wine producing heartland. With its sun-baked Mediterranean climate, the Rhone Valley south of Lyon is ideal for grape-growing, and wine tastings are hugely popular at its more than 1,800 private wineries.

Europe’s thousands of miles of rivers and canals have long been the continent’s commercial and intellectual lifeblood, carrying a steady flow of commerce, culture and ideas. From my vantage point on the Camargue’s sundeck as we cruise south toward the Mediterranean, little appears to have changed; we pass medieval castles, ancient cliffside villages, and fields of sunflowers, wheat and lavender.

Then an enormous nuclear power station or windmill farm will appear, reminding me of what century it is.

There are more advantages than just the leisurely pace: no constantly changing hotel rooms, climbing on and off of hot buses, or getting lost navigating highways or byways. Just smooth sailing down one of the continent’s most vital arteries, where history is always just a dock away. And sometimes sailing by night, which frees up my days and evenings to venture ashore and explore some of the region’s *pièces des résistance*.

Gilbert Arnaud can trace his family’s roots in the Camargue back to the 16th century. He once competed in professional rodeos all over Europe as a bull rider, but now he rears wild Camargue black bulls. The best and brightest he selects to compete in the traditional French sport of *course camarguaise*, a kind of bloodless bullfight considered much more humane than the Spanish-style *corrida*.

Distinguished by their lyre-shaped horns, champion Camargue bulls can bring their owners enormous prestige and plenty of prize money. According to Arnaud, they’re also exceptionally intelligent.

“Don’t even bother waving a red cape at a *course camarguaise* bull,” says Arnaud, who has faced down many a mad Camargue bull in the ring. “He’s too smart for that. He’s going to go right around it and get you.”

I ask Arnaud what happens to the ones that fall short of achieving glory for their owners in the *course camarguaise* ring.

“Some end up on the menus of Camarguais restaurants,” he says — as le steak de taureau or daube de taureau mode gardienne, a popular Provençale beef stew named after *les gardiens*, the French cowboys who wrangle them.

The Camargue horse is an ancient breed indigenous to these wetlands. Most, I learn, roam free in the Camargue’s marshes and salt flats, and on its endless stretches of deserted beach. During cattle drives, *les gardiens* press them into herding service. With their small, sturdy frames and calm, docile dispositions, they’re considered ideal mounts for the work.

“Camargue horses are more pony than horse,” says Arnaud.



Photo: Mark Sissons, Special To The Chronicle



The Camargue horse is the traditional mount of les gardians, the Camargue "cowboys" who herd the black Camargue bulls used in bullfighting.

And beloved ponies they are, given the prominent placement of a Camargue horse statue overlooking the main roundabout in Les Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer, a popular Mediterranean seaside beach resort a few miles south of the Arnauts' spread.

Once a Roman fishing village, the Camargue's capital is also a popular pilgrimage site for Slovak and Hungarian Gypsies who gather here by the thousands each May to venerate Black Sara. According to legend, she was a servant washed ashore here in Biblical times along with saints Mary Magdalene, Marie-Jacobé and Marie-Salomé — the three Maries from which the town derives its name.

Strolling along Les Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer's seaside promenade in the midday heat, I pass pastel ice cream stalls, shuttered cafes, a deserted amusement park and children playing in the sand while their parents sunbathe on the stony beach.

It's hard to believe that this languid holiday town is the Cheyenne of the Mediterranean. Then I pass the town's prominent bullfighting ring — guarded by a life-size black statue of a raging Camargue bull glaring at the cobalt sea.

In Arles, a town of 50,000 just upstream from where the Rhone forks into two branches forming the Camargue, it's said that if you start digging in your basement, you're likely to uncover an ancient foundation. An important Roman outpost, Arles contains a remarkably well-preserved 20,000-seat Roman amphitheater that still hosts plays, concerts and bullfights.



Photo: Mark Sissons, Special To The Chronicle



Still largely intact, the Roman Amphitheatre in the center of Arles is one of France's most impressive ancient ruins.

This famously sunny town also inspired some of Vincent van Gogh's masterpieces, which he painted while briefly residing here in 1888 and 1889. Standing in the exact spots where the Dutch master created some of his most famous works — including the “Bedroom in Arles” paintings, “Starry Night Over the Rhone” and “The Night Cafe” — is a popular bucket-list item among art history lovers.

So should be docking in Avignon, headquarters of Western Christianity during the 14th century. Built to house the popes who fled here from an increasingly corrupt Rome, the immense Palais des Papes is an architectural work of art and the city's main draw.

The largest Gothic building constructed during the Middle Ages, it is a magnificent stone labyrinth of chambers, cloisters, chapels, great halls and cavernous bedrooms where several renegade popes (called antipopes) who refused to recognize Rome's authority — outlaws in Europe's version of the Wild West — prayed, slept, ate, schemed and died.

Farther on up the Rhone, nature takes center stage on another excursion. We drive through Ardeche Gorges, a densely vegetated stretch of canyons cut by the Ardeche River where the limestone cliffs on each side can reach nearly 1,000 feet. We marvel at the enormous natural archway — the Pont de l'Arc — hanging 200 feet above the valley floor.



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An enormous natural archway called the Pont de l'Arc hangs 200 feet above the valley floor in the Ardche Gorges.

We explore Vercors Regional Natural Park, a massif of densely forested mountains on a plateau east of the Rhone Valley, where the rugged vertical landscape is dotted with caves — once the haven of French Resistance fighters until Nazis brutally crushed the uprising. Between the gentle sound track of nature and the astonishing geologic wonders, however, the scene today is so removed from the bustling streets of Paris, the bistros of Lyon or the docks of Marseilles, it could be mistaken for another country.

Back aboard the Camargue after touring some of France's most rugged countryside, we depart for the voyage home, and after a final dinner of classic French dishes, I retire alone to the roof deck. The boat passes a tableau of orchards, fields, mountains and terracotta-roofed villages — and the same rippled lights in the water that added to Van Gogh's unorthodox, untamed style. Just another starry night over the Rhone.

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If you go

CroisiEurope: The five-day Magic of the Provençal Rhône and the Camargue river cruise departs from Lyon, with stops in Arles, Avignon and Viviers. Sailings continue until early November. From \$1,448 per person, all-inclusive, not including airfare. www.croisieurope.rivercruises.com