



THE GOOD LIFE

Days of art, wine and music along the Rhone

JANE NICHOLLS

I sweep back the curtains on my first morning in Arles and Vincent van Gogh's *Starry Night* over the Rhone is right there, perfectly framed in the pre-dawn light by the cabin window of MS Amadeus Provence. The previous evening before dinner, Australian artist Wendy Sharpe gave a pre-dinner talk about van Gogh's time in the southern France town of Arles, showing us some of his paintings, including said *Starry Night* over the Rhone. It's surreal: I'm at the very sweep of river looking at Pont de Trinquetaille, almost exactly 131 years after the artist painted this scene. The stars aren't quite such a yellow explosion but the moon hangs bright and our boat is docked in position to gaze at the same bridge from an almost identical angle.

I've joined for the cruise portion of the irresistibly titled Art, Wine and Music of Southern France tour, conceived and operated by Australian company Renaissance Tours. Our tour leaders are Archibald Prize-winner Sharpe, her partner and fellow painter Bernard Ollis, Peter Bourne "the wine man", and ABC Radio's Christopher Lawrence, who's handling the music program.

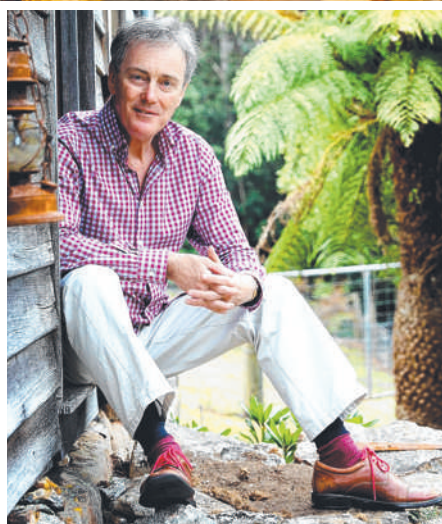
An intimate 54 guests, all from Australia, have been travelling in Provence for several days, and spent the previous afternoon immersed in van Gogh at two dedicated museums in Arles. As we walk from the ship into Arles after breakfast, Sharpe points out a railway bridge that appears in paintings with the Yellow House, where van Gogh lived for some of his time here. The bridge survived World War II bombings, the house did not, but it's a scene familiar to art lovers and Sharpe layers on more details of its history.

Manu, our local guide in Arles, is a hammy



BOB BARKER

Wendy Sharpe and Bernard Ollis, above; Christopher Lawrence, left



SAM ROSEWARNE

IN THE KNOW

Renaissance Tours specialises in cultural journeys and cruises led by well-known Australian experts in their fields. This tour was in collaboration with the Art Gallery Society of NSW, and similar ones are planned for this year, including a Rhine Art and Music Cruise in May, part of the celebrations to mark the 250th anniversary of Beethoven's birth. Prices vary and do not include airfares.

renaissancetours.com.au

wannabe opera singer. "Come on, darlings!" he urges as we pass through the medieval gates of the town and arrive at Arena d'Arles, one of many from the Roman empire that's survived in these parts and, for better or worse, still hosts bullfights. But Manu explains it's a Camargue custom, dating back to

locks and mooring in Avignon for a late-afternoon walk into the old town. Outside the walls I take a ride on the Grande Roue d'Avignon ferris wheel, circling high in the air for marvellous views of the river, the medieval Palace of the Popes (which we visit the next day) and the famous washed-away half-bridge we all sang about in school French classes, "Sur le pont d'Avignon ..."

That night, Bourne gives a short talk on the wines of the Rhone Valley. He explains parallels with Australian wine styles and shares more than a soupcon of Antipodean viticultural history and its (literal) French roots. For decades, Bourne has visited vineyards and winemakers across the world and he turns that expertise into seemingly effortless and blessedly jargon-free talks, drawing in even carefree quaffers who came on the tour for the art and music. Each night he talks about the wines served with dinner and primes us perfectly for vineyard visits.

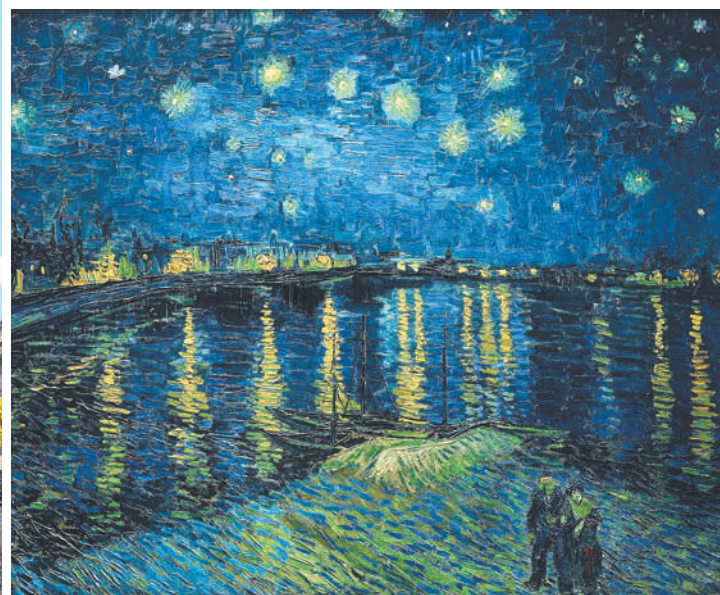
The art, music and wine trio means there's something for everyone, including trailing partners. One or two of the group whose art knowledge sits at the academic end of the spectrum sometimes get a bit snooty, and a visit to Carrieres de Lumieres, aka the Quarries of Lights, just before I join the cruise, becomes slightly controversial.

The show projects van Gogh works on to limestone quarry walls in an "immersive art and music experience" and some find it too touristy, though most love it and I think I would have too.

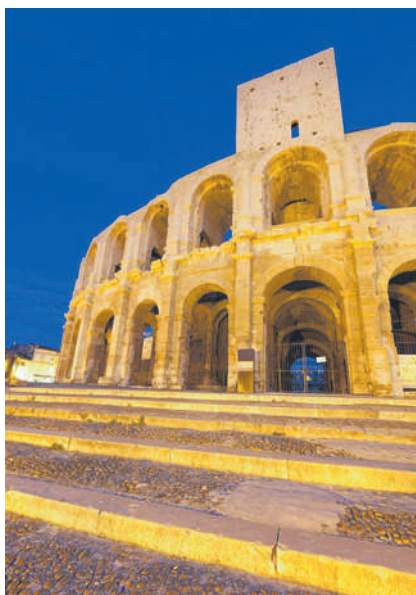
The suite of musical treats is well outside the average tourist realm. Lawrence has been leading tours with Renaissance since 2003 and, now semi-retired from ABC Radio, has a bursting contact book of Australian musicians living in Europe. Several hop aboard our cruise for a night or two to entertain us. First up is the BT Baldwin swing trio. On piano and vocals (and scintillating stories) is Tony Baldwin, a jazzophile Brit who once lived in Australia and now calls France home, accompanied on bass by Leigh Barker (an Aussie who lives in Paris) and on clarinet and sax Jean-Michel Bonnel (oui, he's French).

Sharpe perches at the bar with a giant sketchbook and charcoal, making pictures as they play, which piques the interest of the art crowd, who look over her shoulder and ask to take snaps of her at work.

Another night, Lawrence leads a show with Melbourne-born pianist David Selig, an acclaimed soloist who's made his home in Paris since his late teens and also teaches at Lyon University. Even to my inexpert ears, his playing is sublime, albeit on a piano that the musicians report is losing its battle to stay in tune as it travels up and down the river. Lawrence has devised a highly entertaining cabaret exploring the eccentric life and music of avant-garde 20th-century composer Erik



MUSEE D'ORSAY



Pont Saint-Benezet and Palace of the Popes, Avignon, main; Vincent van Gogh's *Starry Night* over the Rhone; Roman amphitheatre in Arles, left; MS Amadeus Provence, above



SHUTTERSTOCK

Satie and the audience is rapt. The days are equally full. We visit little towns for walking tours with local guides, find more Roman history in Vienne, a 16th-century castle in the storybook town of Tournon-sur-Rhone, which lies across the river from Tain L'Hermitage, where rows of grapevines crease the steep hillsides and where we visit Maison M Chapoutier and Paul Jaboulet Aine vineyards. We are here around vintage but nevertheless

enjoy patient private tastings, with Bourne joining the wineries' experts to introduce us to some memorable drops. Tasting chocolate and Rhone valley wines together at famous chocolatier Valrhona is a deliciously fun surprise.

River cruise itineraries are often pretty tight and when you add in the admirable European custom of shutting up shop in the middle of the day, old hands know that any shopping needs to be done in the moment. I move fast in Tournon-sur-Rhone to zero in on cute vintage French designer tops for my teenage daughters at bargain prices from a second-hand boutique.

On the last evening aboard Amadeus Provence, a passenger has suggested Sharpe might auction her sketches from the jazz night for charity. There's a readymade auctioneer aboard. Writer and actor Jonathan Biggins

leads theatre tours for Renaissance and is along for this trip as a guest. Half a dozen sketches are on the block and the winning bidders are to send the money directly to Dr Catherine Hamlin's Fistula Foundation in Ethiopia. Sharpe's not getting a cent; it's a generous gesture and, with Biggins in charge, the auction is hilarious and in short order raises more than \$4000.

As we near Lyon, the last concert on board from Selig and young Australian singer Lotte Betts-Dean (who lives in London) is classic French chansons. We leave another lock behind as Betts-Dean croons *La Vie en Rose*. It could be Piaf singing. As time marches on, music and wine connect us with the past as we celebrate the present.

Jane Nicholls was a guest of Renaissance Tours.

MORE TO THE STORY

In Tournon-sur-Rhone, the steep vineyards of Tain L'Hermitage across the river are mirrored by the terraced planting of the Garden of Eden, or the Jardin d'Eden. It's a textbook labour of love from former Relais & Chateaux executive Eric LeLong, who bought the historic but horribly overgrown former hillside monastery several years ago and is slowly doing the backbreaking work of restoring it. We climb up several terraces past fountains, statues and rare plants for a spectacular panorama over the Rhone.

■ edenparc.eu

TREASURES OF PNG, THE SPICE ISLANDS & THE CORAL SEA

A luxury expedition cruise from Darwin, to Indonesia, PNG then through the Coral Sea to Auckland. Follow in the footsteps of the early traders and revel in the myriad ancient cultures and World War 2 history that still abounds in this remote and rarely explored part of the world. So many different worlds – and so close to home.

27 nights – 2 to 29 Dec 2020
From \$23,999pp twin share*

Highlights

Darwin, Indonesia, Banda Neira and the Spice Islands, West Papua, PNG, Madang, Trobriand Islands, The Coral Sea, Guadalcanal, Vanuatu, Tanna Island, New Caledonia, Christmas at Sea, Bay of Islands.

Inclusions:

Luxury Ponant Expedition cruise with all meals, beverages, shore excursions with experienced naturalist guides
+ Return Economy Airfares (Aus Capital Cities)
+ 2 nights Darwin hotel pre-cruise
+ Darwin transfers and choice of day tour
+ Luxury limo transfers*



ULTIMATECRUISING.COM.AU
OR CALL US ON 1300 485 846

*Conditions apply. Subject to availability at time of booking. New bookings only. Not combinable with any other offer. Price based upon PR4 Stateroom. Flights is economy class to DAR ex SYD/MEL/BNE/ADL/CBR/PER/HBT & return from AKL. Luxury car transfers valid to 35kms from SYD/MEL/BNE/ADL/CBR/PER/HBT airport. Image Copyright Ponant Nathalie Michel 1630

