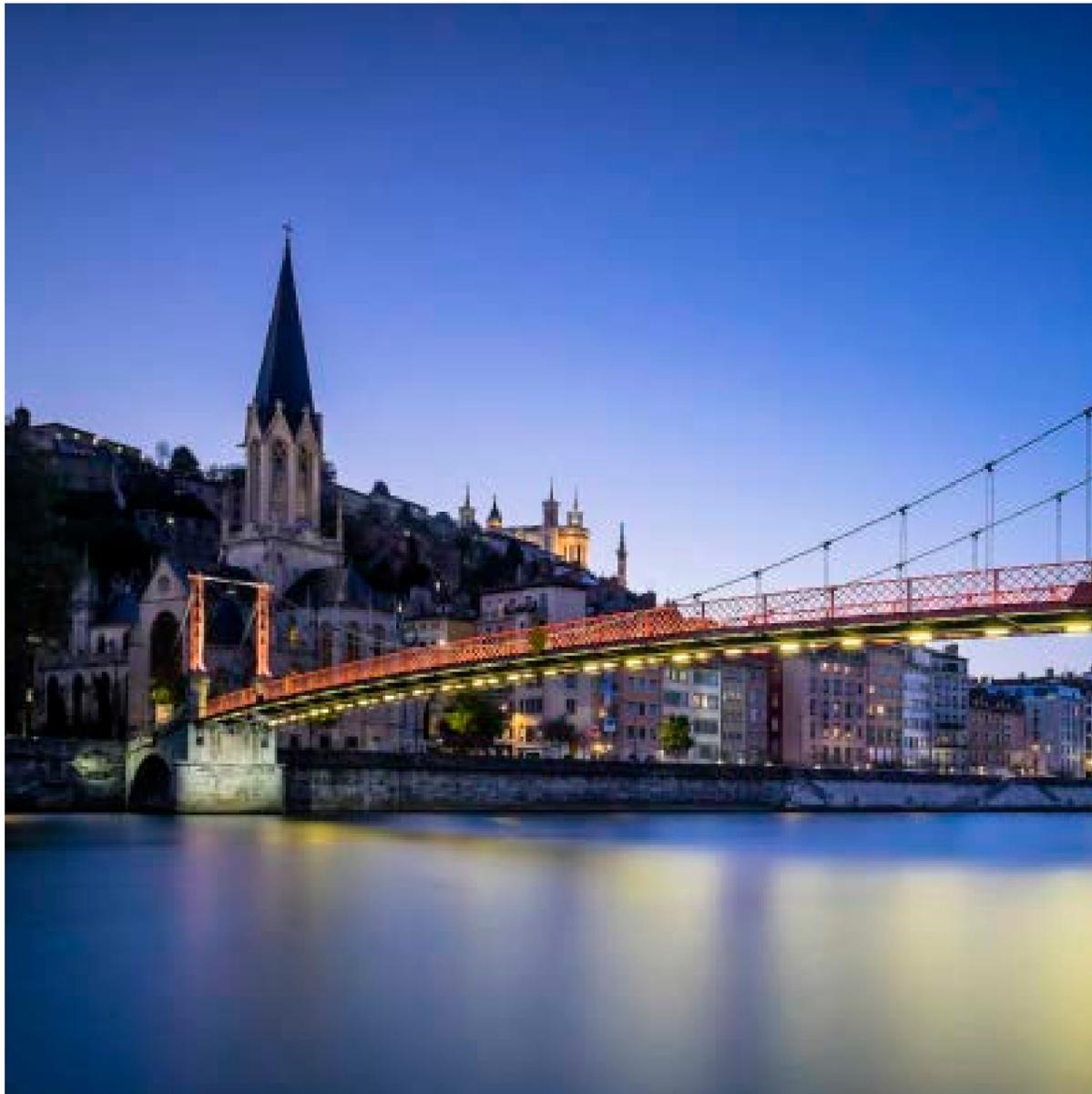


TAKE HER TO THE RIVER

By Catherine McGregor



From her Rhône River stateroom, Catherine McGregor dips into the history, culture and cuisine of southern France.

Above: Saint Georges footbridge over the Saône River, Lyon.



Far left: The cobblestoned streets of Vieux-Lyon. **Left:** An onboard suite.

THE FIRST DAY of a holiday feels pretty wonderful, right? Now imagine it without any niggling worries about flights or transfers or hotels or itineraries or language, but with a glass of Champagne in hand and a debonair French man assuring you that everything – absolutely everything – is taken care of.

That's how it feels to be welcomed aboard Uniworld's Burgundy & Provence luxury river cruise, an eight-day journey down the Rhône from Lyon to Avignon. I've arrived hot and bedraggled, and (not at all) fresh from a morning train from Geneva and a crowded cross-town tram to Lyon's river port. After two months backpacking through Europe, to me the SS Catherine seems like a beautiful mirage: a floating boutique hotel with modern art lining the walls, a huge custom-made Murano glass chandelier in the lobby and rooms so luxurious that "cabin" feels inadequate (in onboard parlance, they're "staterooms").

During the cocktail reception – by now I've switched from Champagne to pastis, the Provençal drink of Pernod and water – we get a taster of the week ahead: small-group walking tours and hiking, cycling and kayaking for the more adventurous; authentic behind-the-scenes village experiences; and plenty of free time to explore one of the most gorgeous areas of France.

But first, dinner. As the summertime shadows lengthen and the ship pulls out of dock, we sit down to the first of a string of lavish meals. The all-inclusive price covers drinks, a groaning buffet breakfast and lunch every day, and a belt-loosening seven-course dinner each night. Uniworld takes great pride in serving dishes from the places you're travelling through: options on our trip include beef bourguignon ("bourguignon" means "of Burgundy") and truffles grown further south in Provence. According to the cruise veterans I talk to over dinner, you'll eat well on every route, but this journey is one of the gastronomic jewels in the company's crown. It makes sense: the Burgundy region is renowned not only for its legendary wines but a passion for food that's remarkable even for this food-obsessed country.

That's particularly true in Lyon, France's undisputed – okay, except by Paris – culinary capital, which a group of us explore by bikes one sunny July morning. We pedal through the cobblestoned streets of Vieux-Lyon, one of the world's largest Renaissance neighbourhoods, and hop off our bikes to explore one of the more than 200 secret passages, or *traboules*, that criss-cross the area and were once used by silk weavers to transport their wares to the river. Then we cruise along the riverbank to the hip new neighbourhood known as the Confluence, where the mighty Rhône River meets the smaller Saône. The day before, we'd sailed up the

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Saône to visit Beaune, the small town that's home to a beloved architectural symbol of Burgundy. The spectacular Hospices de Beaune was built in the 15th century to care for the area's plague-ravaged and destitute. Incredibly, it remained a hospital until the late 1970s – a working life of more than 500 years.

One of the pleasures of river cruising is the simple act of pulling back the curtain in the morning: while you've been eating, or sleeping, or drinking a nightcap on deck in the warm night air, the ship has glided on through hushed countryside to a completely new destination. One morning, we wake outside the tiny riverside village of Viviers, and walk to the appropriately petite cathedral on a hill for a private organ recital. Another day, we pile into coaches to visit Arles, the ancient Roman outpost made famous for a second time as the home for a year of Vincent van Gogh. This is where he was admitted to a psychiatric hospital after cutting off an ear, and where he painted some of his most enduring works, including "Cafe Terrace at Night". You can visit the Café du Forum today, its walls still the same sunny yellow they were when van Gogh painted it in 1888.

We end our journey in the great walled city of Avignon. In the 14th century, this was the seat of the popes, until the Papal Court was finally convinced to up-sticks and head back to Rome. The Palais des Papes (Palace of the Popes) lost most of its treasures during the French Revolution, and today it's largely an austere shell that fails to fire one's imagination – mine, at least.

But then, towards the end of our tour, something wonderful happens. We're in the enormous Grand Chapel, where the popes worshipped amid Gregorian chanting choirs. Our guide quietens the group, telling us it's time for our surprise. Then he starts to sing. His voice is high and clear – we learn later that he's a professional countertenor, moonlighting as a tour guide – and it reverberates in this immense, empty space. All around us the throngs of tourists fall silent, then explode in applause. A remarkable moment, on a trip full of them. +