

Go with the flow on the River Rhône

Catherine McGregor enjoys an eight-day river cruise in France, where onboard luxury is matched by excursions and activities in historic towns and villages.

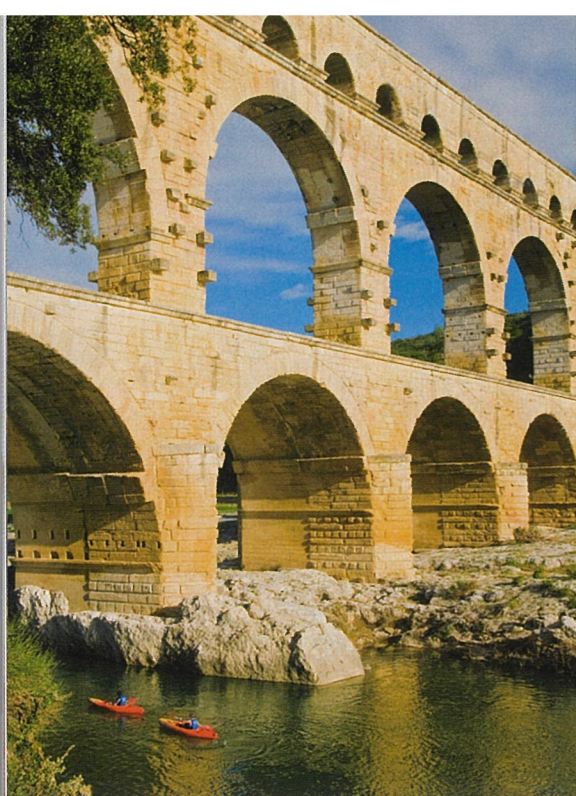
Not long after breakfast, a group of us are strolling along an avenue on the outskirts of Viviers, a sleepy settlement on the banks of the River Rhône in the south of France. It's mid July and already hot, and I'm saying a silent thanks to whichever forward-thinking town planner it was who thought to plant the majestic plane trees that line the road. Then our tour guide pipes up: it isn't some forgotten bureaucrat to whom we owe our gratitude, she tells us, but Napoleon III, who had the trees planted along roadsides all over southern France to provide shade for his troops and other travellers. Fittingly, we're here on Bastille Day, celebrating the revolutionary war that made a national hero of that Napoleon's uncle, the diminutive Napoleon Bonaparte.

A small, walled city that has remained largely unchanged since the Middle Ages, Viviers is the sort of place you'd be lucky, if unlikely, to stumble upon on a drive through the French countryside. I'm discovering it thanks to Uniworld River Cruises, which is transporting me through Burgundy and Provence onboard my namesake ship, the S.S. Catherine (actually named after the woman who christened it, actress Catherine Deneuve). Along the way I've already learned the correct way to make crêpes Suzette at the legendary Paul Bocuse Institute in Lyon, the historic city at the junction of the Rhône and Saône rivers. I've explored the town of Beaune and its extravagantly decorated Hôtel-Dieu, a 15th-century hospital for the poor turned modern-day museum. And I've hiked a hill trail through the river-hugging Hermitage vineyards, where some of France's most acclaimed – and expensive – wines are produced.

Now, on day three, with a group of my fellow passengers, I am wandering »

A Hermitage vineyard overlooking the Rhône. RIGHT FROM TOP: Historic Arles, with its World Heritage Site amphitheatre standing out amongst the orange rooftops; the S.S. Catherine; local men playing bocce, a ball game similar to petanque.





through Viviers' cobblestone streets in the dappled sunshine. Our destination: St Vincent's, a tiny jewel-box of a church, which is France's smallest active cathedral and one of its oldest. As we file in I hear mutterings about "ABC" – European tourist lingo, I find out, for "Another Bloody Church". But this won't be another round of dutifully admiring marble sculptures and vast religious oil paintings. We're here for something special: a private organ recital that runs the gamut from George Frideric Handel to *Amazing Grace* – the latter a nod, I suspect, to the Americans who make up most of the S.S. Catherine's passenger count. To mark Bastille Day, the programme concludes with a rousing rendition of the national anthem, *La Marseillaise*, and shouts of "Vive la France!" from hosts and guests alike.

Then it's time for more (optional) activities. Some of us follow our guide home to have morning tea in the walled garden of her medieval townhouse; others head to the town hall for a performance of regional dances, or to a pottery studio to watch a bowl being fashioned from local clay. On the way back, a few of us stop at the village *boulodrome* (petanque court), where we've been challenged to a match by the ship's staff. A group of old-timers watches politely, no doubt suppressing the urge to laugh at our incompetent ball-tossing, then they

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join us for cold drinks seemingly magicked out of nowhere by our unflappable cruise manager.

The Viviers morning is one that perfectly sums up Uniworld, a luxury cruise company with an emphasis on authentic and unique local experiences. Their eight-day Rhône cruise includes excursions to must-see destinations like Avignon's 14th-century Papal Palace, Lyon's vast Les Halles food market and Arles, the town made famous by former resident Vincent van Gogh. But the trip makes time for quirkier outings too. Options include kayaking under the ancient Pont du Gard aqueduct, exploring the steep vineyards of the Cotes du Rhône wine appellation, and chasing after a local farmer and his dog in search of a delicacy that's as synonymous with southern France as olive oil and lavender: pungently scented Périgord truffles, the region's "black gold".

If all that activity sounds too much like hard work, you can always surrender to your inner sloth and stay onboard for the day. The S.S. Catherine is so fantastically luxurious, the service so uniformly attentive, that it's an ever-present temptation. One day I give in, waving my fellow passengers

goodbye as they set off on their adventures, and spend the day lazing on deck in the sun, interrupted only occasionally by the brief murmur of a waiter offering a drink and "Perhaps a little snack, Miss McGregor?"

With a staff to guest ratio of one to three – that's at full capacity of 159 guests; it's even higher on my two-thirds-full sailing – the S.S. Catherine feels less like a standard cruise ship and more like a floating boutique hotel. It's small enough that staff get to know what guests want – and don't – in double-quick time. "I like a particular brand of rum in my rum and coke, and they remember," a fellow guest tells me. "I don't like swizzle sticks, so I never get those." Each morning, without fail, a double macchiato (my preferred jump-start) appears at my breakfast table, without me ever having to croak out a caffeine-starved request.

For dedicated foodies, select sailings have a special gourmet twist. Connoisseur Collection trips include extra outings like cooking classes, chocolate tastings – the ship spends a day berthed close to the world-renowned Valrhona chocolate factory – and winery visits. But even on the

LEFT: Kayaking under the Pont du Gard aqueduct; Hôtel-Dieu in Beaune. **RIGHT, FROM TOP:** The ship's opulent decor in the lobby and Van Gogh Lounge; a visit to the Valrhona chocolate factory is an option on some cruises; the Avignon riverside.

standard sailing, you'll eat like a queen. The all-inclusive price covers a lavish breakfast and lunch, followed by a spectacular seven-course dinner featuring regional specialities (Ardèche terrine, Provençal pistou soup, Burgundian beef bourguignon) with local wines and cheeses. Somehow I'm not surprised when one afternoon I run into our head chef on his way back from a local village market, his arms full with bags of picked-that-day produce.

It is in the evenings that river cruising really comes into its own. As the shadows lengthen and cocktail hour begins, the S.S. Catherine's engine sputters into life – it's time to move on. We glide south, rural France moving past like an ever-changing film strip: grand chateaux and humble farmhouses; vineyards and forests; fishermen and freedom campers and local families picnicking in the waning sun. Suddenly the engine cuts out – we're entering a lock. We descend, and the green countryside views are replaced by slate-coloured brick walls, so close to the ship's sides you could reach out and touch them. We sink lower, and it goes dark. We wait. Then the lock opens, the sun streams in, and we sail on towards the coast. **AWW** Catherine McGregor sailed courtesy of Uniworld Boutique River Cruises.

Cruise details

Enjoy Uniworld's Boutique River Cruises' eight-day, all-inclusive Burgundy and Provence river cruise aboard the S.S. Catherine between Avignon and Lyon. Departure dates available from March to November 2018, priced from \$4299 per person twin share. Includes luxury accommodation, all onboard meals and drinks, excursions and transfers. Visit uniworld.com/nz, call 0800 484 333, or ask your travel agent.

