



Discovering Vincent

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As the Air France flight glided through the silver linings of clouds, I slumped in my seat, soporific after the meal prepared by award-winning chefs, and dreamed of people bundled in fleece, and the strong wind called the mistral that funnelled through the Rhone Valley. It was the mistral that created the cloudless skies and the luminous light that attracted artists like Vincent van Gogh and Picasso to Arles in Provence, France. When I arrived in Arles, the mistral was blowing furiously and winter was just around the corner.

Arles is hidden beneath layers of history. Julius Caesar, after his victory over Marseilles, thanked the Arlesians for their help by making the city a colony ruled by Roman law. Today, the show-piece of the town is the two-tiered Roman amphitheatre of Arles where a 20,000-strong crowd watched slaves, criminals and wild animals fight, for more than four centuries. After the fall of the Roman Empire, it became a fortress with houses and churches inside. It was dramatist Prosper Merimee who initiated the change, which resulted in the amphitheatre being declared a national monument in the 1820s. The amphitheatre was built of limestone hauled from quarries in the marshy Rhone area. I saw hundreds of shells of molluscs embedded in the stone. My hotel, Amphitheatre, was the perfect launchpad—Old Cardinal's palace done up in deep shades of burgundy and mustard in a retro style with Art Deco touches.

One of the main reasons I was in Arles was to explore the haunts of my favourite artist, Vincent Van Gogh. Coming from a monochrome palette and grey skies of Paris and Holland, the artist was seduced by the cloudless clear skies and the luminous quality of the light. It was his most frenzied and prolific period of creativity, with 300 paintings in 15 months. As soon as he arrived in Arles, he rented a room and started painting an almond branch blossoming in a glass. As spring made its presence felt, Vincent took to the fields and painted the fruit trees, which reminded him of Japanese prints. "Strangely no original paintings of the artist remain in Arles today, though you can see all the places that inspired his famous paintings," explained my guide Catherine Hersant.

"Though Arles has stunning architecture, what the artist loved to paint was its people, landscapes and bars." They say that the eccentric painter used to balance candles on his wide-brimmed straw hat so he could continue to work through the evenings. Images of the artist looked up at me from every place in town: from magnets and postcards to hotels and cafes named after him.

I took a walk with Hersant, following easel-like boards, indicating places that inspired his paintings. "Of course, things change," she said. So, sadly the yellow house where he and Gauguin lived, was bombed in 1944 and does not exist anymore, though an easel indicates the spot where he painted 'Starry Night over the Rhone' in September 1888. I was glad to see that Hotel Dieu, the hospital where he spent some time and painted 'Courtyard of the Hospital at Arles', has not changed much. The mustard walls of the building and the patches of multi-hued flowers evoked a feeling of nostalgia. A small shop there sells Vincent-themed postcards, place mats, trinkets and memorabilia for tourists who want to recreate his magic in their homes.

Arles's other great draw is its Roman theatre, which was pilfered for construction material down the ages and today the stage has two lonely pillars left, nicknamed the 'two widows'. "We still use the theatre to stage plays and to crown our Queen of Arles, once every four years," said Hersant. The Queen of Arles is a local ambassador of Provençal culture, language and traditions. "Come back in the summer. That's when the theatre stage is used to screen movies like Ben Hur, Quo Vadis and Gladiator, when the whole city is caught up in a Roman fever with a Roman festival, when you can try out Roman hairstyles, play Roman board games, learn to tie a toga or try your

hand at Roman cooking,” she said enthusiastically.

I people-watched in the eye-catching square Plaza de la Republique, with a towering Roman obelisk and a Renaissance fountain, where mothers and babies spend endless hours basking in the sunshine. The church of St Tropime with the Last Judgment carved on its portal graced the square, with its Corinthian columns, pillars and capitals and interiors filled with tapestries from the town of Aubusson. There is no place in the town where some architectural detail does not catch your eye: the twisted pillars outside the Hotel Leela in the Mannerist style of Florence, gargoyles, friezes and mascarons on facades and oratories and statues of Mother Mary, at every street corner.

I walked to the tree-shaded Place du Forum, which was the Roman Forum long ago. Looming over the square with his hat set at a jaunty angle is Frédéric Mistral, poet and winner of the 1904 Nobel Prize for literature. Close by is the Grand Hotel Nord Pinus housed in a classic French townhouse, which used to host movie stars, bull fighters and artists down the ages, and resonates with the ghosts of Hemingway and Picasso. Tourists flock to this square to have a coffee at Café Van Gogh painted a bright citrus yellow, which the artist painted against the backdrop of a starlit night in the classic ‘Café Terrace at Night’. As I sipped on anise-flavoured pastis, the local liqueur, I mused on the fact that more than one hundred years after Vincent painted it, the Cafe Terrace is still in Arles serving drinks to its thirsty patrons.

I explored Roquette: the area that was the haunt of fishermen is now home to the Bohemian BoBo community. The buildings wear their faded paint with panache, every house has some greenery from cacti in ceramic pots to window boxes bursting with blooms, children play football and men gossip....

Arles is not all time-warp. It has a rich art scene. “What Cannes is for films, Arles is for photography,” pointed out Hersant. The annual international photography festival ‘Rencontres d’Arles’, founded in 1969 with new programmes every year, displays works in historical venues around the town. On the cards is the maverick art collector Maja Hoffmann’s dream project to make Arles a vanguard art scene with Frank O. Gehry’s revolutionary designs—an art world with spaces for contemporary art in converted factory buildings. The building, after many delays and rejections, is slated to open in 2017.

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