



OUVERT

we made it to
Champagne about
5pm but had
a steep hike to
the hotel

FOLLOWING THE RHÔNE TO THE SEA

A RETURN TO LIFE ON THE ROAD
IN THE RHÔNE RIVER VALLEY & PROVENCE

by DAN D'AMBROSIO

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS by EMMA FICK

SCRATCH THE SURFACE OF ANY FRENCH CITY DEEPLY ENOUGH AND YOU'LL FIND ROMAN BRICK.

Nowhere is that more true than in Lyon — Lugdunum to the Romans — where the Emperor Augustus built the largest Roman theater in Gaul around 15 BC.

The spectacular outdoor theater with stadium seating, perched on a hillside above Lyon's bustling city center, is still in use today. It lay at the end of the first leg of a two-week tour my wife Alice and I took in Switzerland and France in September.

The trip, planned by French tour operator Cyclomundo (cyclomundo.com) in conjunction with Transhumance Voyages, began in Gaillard, France, just outside of Geneva.

This tour was the first for Alice and me after an eight-year hiatus from touring in Europe. For four straight years we'd ridden in Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, and Ireland, all self-guided and all excellent.

The approach that Alice and I prefer is to ride by ourselves with maps, GPS, or cue sheets in hand, and find our own way, which inevitably presents challenging days when those guides don't quite add up.

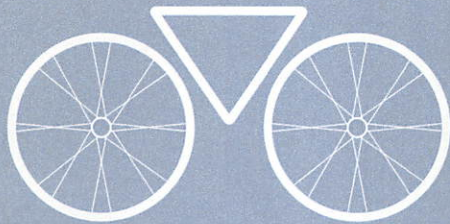
It's not that we look for navigational trouble,

but we feel a little bit of pride and excitement at getting ourselves out of a sticky situation. Let's just say it adds to the sense of adventure without requiring us to truly throw ourselves onto the mercy of the unknown. Mostly we like the feeling of being together — just the two of us — to take on a challenge and have experiences that are very much out of the normal course of day-to-day life.

Alice and I also enjoy ending the day in nice surroundings — a 13th century monastery converted to a four-star hotel in France, for example, or an upscale guesthouse on the Portuguese coast overlooking the Atlantic Ocean. It's a little indulgence in our otherwise workaday lives. And we're disappointed when our accommodations lack the "wow" factor we're looking for, which happens with some frequency.

Cyclomundo owner Bruno Toutain met us on the first day of our tour at our hotel in Gaillard, where Cyclomundo is based. When Bruno finished the overview of our trip, he handed us a GPS, warning that it may need to be charged after four or five hours. Now, we are slow bike tourists, so the thought of having to charge the GPS after four or five hours was a bit alarming. We're usually on the road longer than that in any given day, but it all worked out.

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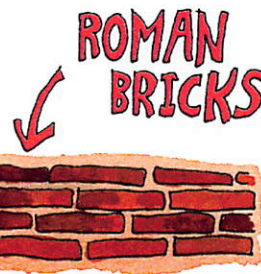
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The very start of our trip had been on foot as we chose to walk the four-and-a-half miles to Gaillard from Geneva — an exotic stroll far from our little home in Vermont. Alice and I were charmed by Geneva, a city on a beautiful lake that has built its reputation on diplomacy and exquisite craftsmanship, exemplified most famously by the watches that have been made there for hundreds of years. A trip through the Patek Philippe Museum in the afternoon while Alice rested from jet lag was something I'll never forget — three floors of sparkling, intricate watch movements chronicling the development of what many believe is the finest watch in the world.



Alice and I explored Geneva on foot. We walked to the Jet d'Eau on Lake Geneva, not far from where the lake empties into the Rhône River. Jet d'Eau, installed in 1951, is a spectacular fountain that consists simply of a powerful stream of water shooting nearly 500 feet into the air. We were told the fountain represents Geneva's vitality and its love of nature — it works on both counts.

The walk from Geneva to Gaillard was the perfect way to begin our trip, walking under our own power through neighborhoods and on paths not accessible to cars. As Alice wrote in notes during the trip, the only mistake we made that day was not stopping at a *pâtisserie* en route that was open on Sunday. Arriving in Gaillard, the only business we found open was the car wash. We would not make that mistake again.

Alice and I developed an efficient and delicious lunch plan in France that we hope to repeat in the coming years as we discover more of Europe. Every morning before leaving for the day's ride, we would find a *boulangerie*

or *pâtisserie* and buy sandwiches and pastries for lunch, freeing us from the need to find a place to eat later. We would simply stop when a bench or a park beckoned and break out our sandwiches and chocolate croissants. It made things so much easier and never failed us. There are boulangeries and *pâtisseries* — and park benches — everywhere in France.

Our first day of riding was from Gaillard to Seyssel on the banks of the Rhône River. We cycled about 45 miles with an elevation gain of nearly 2,300 feet. It would turn out to be among the most challenging days of our trip.

PÂTISSERIE LUNCH ↓



WE WOULD SIMPLY STOP WHEN A BENCH OR A PARK BECKONED AND BREAK OUT OUR SANDWICHES AND CHOCOLATE CROISSANTS.

For the first half of the trip, from Gaillard to Lyon, we would follow the Rhône River, much of the time on the ViaRhôna, a truly ambitious project undertaken by both Switzerland and France to provide a bike route from the source of the Rhône River in the Swiss Alps to its delta on the French Mediterranean coast. It's also part of Route 17 in the Eurovelo network (eurovelo.com). The route is signed and currently encompasses nearly 500 miles in France and more than 200 miles in Switzerland, but it is a work in progress.

Bruno's only objection to ViaRhôna is that it often bypasses the wonderful French villages that can be found up and down the Rhône River valley — a legitimate criticism overcome by the pleasure of cycling car-free through a bucolic landscape flanked by mountain heights on both sides.

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The Rhône River valley is relatively lush, with miles of vineyards and cornfields, although mid-September is the withering end of the season and the cornfields rustled a dry brown in the gentle winds that accompanied us on most of the ride.

At one point, as Alice and I rode through miles of sunflower fields where the spindly stalks held their giant blackened heads bent down, we thought back to our tour in Portugal, taken perhaps unwisely in June to celebrate my 50th birthday, where we rode through sunflower fields stretching to the horizon with thousands of plants holding their bright yellow heads up to face the blazing sun.

We preferred that spectacular sight to the subdued fields we were riding through now, but we were reminded that there really isn't a bad day or a disappointing vista when you're on a bike tour. Instead we appreciated the contrast of the seasons.

Toward the end of our first day, as we made our way through the steep climbs leading into Seyssel, we were walking our bikes at one point when we came across an elderly French gentleman enjoying the evening in the front yard of his rural home with his dog. He called out to us, asking if we wanted to share a drink with him, indicating that we could sit at the small table he had set up outside, but we declined and continued to climb.

I thought of the allegation I had heard on various occasions that the French are unfriendly and arrogant. Of course, it isn't true. Some people are unfriendly and arrogant, no matter where you are. Most people are not.

During the course of our French tour, Alice and I developed an inordinate love of Orangina, a lightly carbonated soda that is 12 percent citrus juice and comes in a distinctive little round bottle. Every day, Alice and I opted for Oranginas as the drink of choice for our lunch.



Fittingly, Orangina has an adventurous backstory, having been first sold at a trade fair in Algiers after being developed by a Spanish chemist in 1933. Orangina migrated to a Marseille trade fair in 1935, gaining a foothold in Europe, and has since spread throughout the world, although it's more popular elsewhere than in the U.S.

On the second day of our tour, Orangina played an even more important role than usual for Alice and me. We only rode about 32 miles that day, and the climbing wasn't nearly as challenging as the first day had been, but we were struggling a bit with fatigue and getting used to our rental bikes. We also had some difficulty finding our hotel and had to walk the final half mile or so as it sat perched high above the valley floor.

From Alice's notes: "We made it to Champagneux about 4:00 PM but had a steep hike to the hotel. I was so exhausted I collapsed on the bed, but Dan went down and found out that he could get Oranginas for us and he came

up and surprised me with the news. I joined him on the terrace for an Orangina or two, and lay in the sun on a lounge chair. Beautiful view, felt like heaven."

The next stop, after a ride of nearly 45 miles on and off the ViaRhôna and winding on tiny roads through miles of rustling cornfields and forested paths, was Pérouges, a walled, medieval village frozen in time on a hilltop. There the Romans once posted flags in a tower high above the Rhône to warn of enemies approaching or signal the arrival of supply ships.

The cobblestoned streets were much too rough to ride our bikes, so we walked through the gate next to an ancient church and entered another world. In a square near our hotel, a tree planted at the time of the French Revolution reminded me of something from a fairy tale with its massive, gnarled trunk and truncated branches supported by poles because they had become weakened by the passing of centuries.

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The next day we rode into Lyon, where we had a rest day. We walked nearly 10 miles that day in a determined effort to see as much of this fascinating and vibrant city at the confluence of the Rhône and Saône rivers as we could. We began high above the city where the silk industry thrived starting in the 15th century.

A museum called La Maison des Canuts (maisondescanuts.fr/en), or silk weaver's house, gave us a good introduction, explaining the endless labor that went not only into weaving silk, but also into creating silk thread — a natural byproduct of silkworms. The buildings where the weavers worked had high ceilings to accommodate the tall looms, and big windows to bring in natural light, making them highly sought after for apartments in today's Lyon.

We crisscrossed the Saône River on pedestrian bridges, going from art museums to Roman ruins to the Basilica of Notre-Dame de Fourvière, built with private funds between 1872 and 1884 atop Fourvière Hill, where its towering spires can be seen from almost anywhere in the city. The site was formerly occupied by the Roman Forum of the emperor Trajan, dating to 112 AD.

Inside the basilica, the walls were decorated with giant murals with an almost iridescent quality, unlike anything we had seen in the many ancient churches we've visited in Europe. The haunting tones of a flutist filled the church as we walked in, lending an ethereal quality that was abruptly broken when the young man stopped playing and ran out of the church from behind a roped-off area.

"I don't think he was supposed to be there, but we certainly benefited from and enjoyed his musical talent," Alice wrote in her notes that evening.

The Roman amphitheater dating to 15 BC is located near the basilica and once held up to 10,000 Roman citizens for performances. The amphitheater is still used today and is attached to an exhaustive museum, built partially underground and jam-packed with Roman artifacts, including a bronze tablet with the text of a speech given by the

Emperor Claudius in 48 AD on the importance of Lyon to the Roman empire.

The next day we boarded a TGV train from Lyon, speeding through the French countryside at speeds approaching 200 MPH to reach Avignon and the start of the second leg of our journey through the Provence region of France to the Mediterranean Sea.

BASILICA OF NOTRE-DAME DE FOURVIÈRE



Provence offered a stark and beguiling contrast to the Rhône River valley. It is a land of vineyards and olive groves and agriculture of many kinds, but with an almost desert-like aspect of sharp, craggy mountains of rock rising on the horizon and a dry, undulating landscape stretching before us.

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The weather, now sunny and beautiful after off-and-on days of rain and clouds, was more than welcome. With a crystal blue sky and warm fall sun that wrapped us in a pleasant heat, we pedaled the smooth Provençal roads.

When I think of Provence, I will always think of the late afternoon as we approached St. Maximin on our next-to-last day of cycling. We were riding through miles of vineyards, looking for the “tiny road” indicated on our cue sheet, near a winery. Somehow we missed the tiny road and the winery. There was a collection of buildings we suspected was a winery, but no sign to confirm our suspicions.

At that point, Alice and I pulled out the iPhone we brought on the trip and fired up Google maps, our last gambit when our ability to navigate using the tools provided to us are failing.

“Turn here,” Alice said.

I looked at a dirt track about eight feet wide leading into a vineyard — and hesitated.

“Turn here, it’s what Google Maps is telling us to do,” Alice repeated.

We started on the track, riding across someone’s private property who fortunately wasn’t there to witness it, until the track abruptly ended. Now to be fair, Google Maps has bailed us out of many a sticky situation, but even it doesn’t work all the time.

We returned to the road and pedaled back the way we’d come, this time seeing a sign for the winery and then spotting the tiny, unnamed road we had missed. We were rewarded that evening with a stay in the most spectacular accommodations of the trip, the aforementioned four-star hotel built in a converted 13th century monastery.

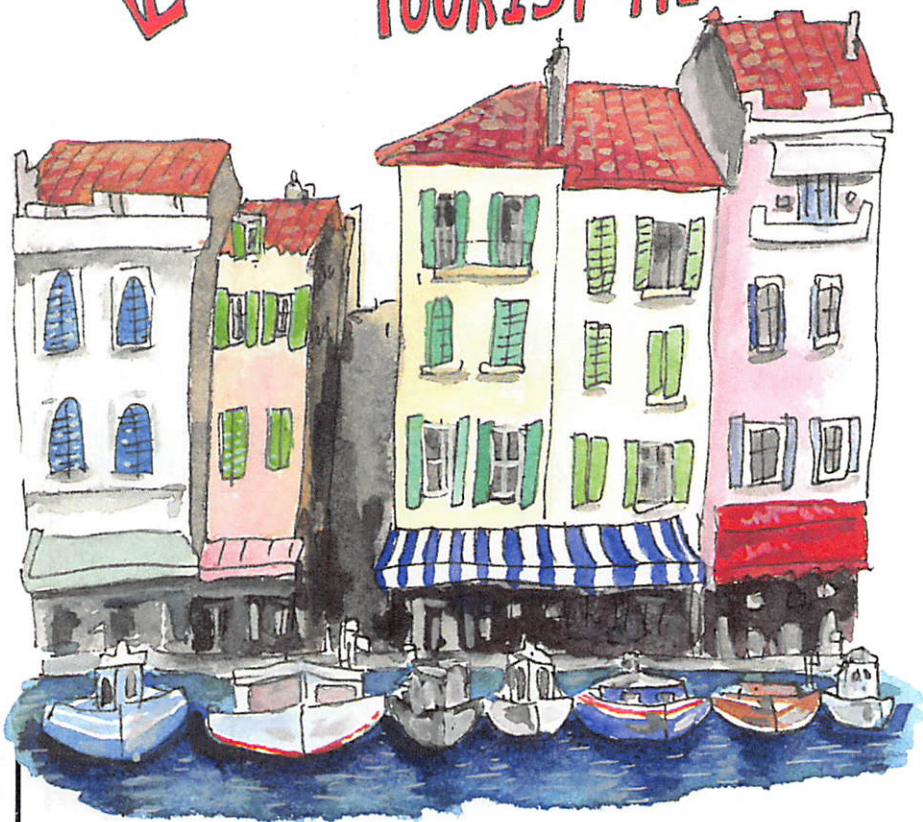
Our trip ended with an equally unforgettable six-mile descent into Cassis, the former fishing village turned tourist mecca tucked into a picturesque bay on the Mediterranean overlooked by a medieval castle on a towering seaside cliff that also had been converted into a luxury hotel and is lit dramatically at night.

Storing our bikes at the hotel for the last time, Alice and I spent the next day hiking the coast to one of the many sheltered inlets called *calanques* that line the coast of Cassis. Returning to the “fishing village” late in the afternoon, we caught the last boat out to shuttle down the cliff-lined coast to get a glimpse of all the *calanques* under a mysterious haze cloaking the coast and a gauzy, brilliant orb of sun lowering in the sky.

It was a fitting end to another great adventure that has both of us excited now that we have returned to the roads of Europe after an eight-year absence. **AC**

Dan D’Ambrosio is a contributing writer for Adventure Cyclist magazine.

CASSIS FISHING- VILLAGE-TURNED- TOURIST-MECCA



NUTS & BOLTS

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WHEN TO GO

Cyclomundo, the tour operator, suggests any time from April through October. We went in September. The weather was mixed, with some cool, rainy days. Two perfect days in Provence with sun and temperatures in the 70s.

GETTING THERE

We flew in and out of Geneva. There are many choices of airlines from the East Coast — we scored big on Swiss Airlines with two round-trip tickets for \$1,100 (off-season helps!). And don't wait until the last minute to book train tickets from Geneva to Lyon or Cassis back to Geneva.

TOUR OPERATORS

We used Cyclomundo (cyclomundo.com), which provided excellent support and materials. There are many, many tour operators who offer trips in France.

FOOD

In a word: fantastic. We got our lunch every day before we started riding at one of the millions of bakeries in France where wonderful sandwiches are always available. Also cheap!

MORE INFORMATION

If you go to Cassis, make sure to take the boat ride along the coast. It's spectacular. The Lyon City Boat cruise on the Saône River is equally enjoyable, although it's urban rather than soaring mountain coast.



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