

Trip Journal
Viking River Cruise 2017
Lyon and Provence with pre-cruise extension in Nice

Saturday June 3

We arrived early to Terminal A at Logan Airport and had a leisurely late lunch and wine flights. We then arrived in plenty of time to board Delta flight 126 to Amsterdam. The plane was already there, our luggage had been loaded, and it was more than an hour from scheduled departure. What could go wrong?

Well, this is an airport, so the answer is "anything and everything"? Turns out Delta 124 was due to leave from the same gate (14) but two hours earlier, thus freeing up the gate, freeing it up. Turns out flight 124 was three hours late arriving, and departure rescheduled for 8:30. But instead of landing it at a different gate (15 was empty) so as to leave 14 for us, they put it on 14 and didn't make a gate change for us (say, to 15, which was empty). Instead they waited the interminable time for flight 124 to deplane, then for more time, then finally decided they would tow flight 124 to gate 15, and only then would 126 be towed to 14. After which it had to be filled with food. By the time we finally boarded, got the head of the queue to takeoff and actually had wheels up, we were over an hour late.

Our connection at Amsterdam/Schiphol was then down to about 50 minutes. We ran through the airport, but couldn't exactly run through the line for passport control, which was about 3/4 of a mile long. They were making announcements that anyone with a flight departure at or before 9:25 could use the expedited line. Ours was 9:30. This went on for 10 long minutes with the clock ticking, until they finally announced 9:30. We went through the expedited line, ran the rest of the 3/8 mile to the terminal, and made the flight.

Once in Nice everything went smoothly and poof -- it was Sunday.

Sunday June 4

We arrived at the hotel around 1:00 and our room was ready, which was delightful after the ordeal of the previous (a.k.a. same) day. We met with the Viking concierge, got an overview lecture, got a restaurant reservation from him for dinner, and then set out on foot to explore the Old City, with the primary goal of sighting our restaurant for later. We walked for an hour or two, accomplished our primary objective, and then returned to the hotel to shower, do a little unpacking, and get ready for dinner. Then it was off for a before dinner drink in the hotel lounge and then dinner at a wonderful restaurant in the old town, Marcel Bistro chic. We chose to sit inside (a lot of the clients like dining al fresco). We shared three dishes -- a foie gras with baked almonds and fig jam, the local fried small things (literally called that on the menu) which tonight turned out to be anchovies, and a daub -- beef stew in a red wine sauce. They were all wonderful and

sharing two ways made the quantity plausible, so we stuffed ourselves by sharing an amazingly rich cheesecake which was also a large portion and easily shared.

We wandered around after dinner, amazed at how many people are out and about at 10:00 on a Sunday, most of them eating outdoors at restaurants throughout the old city.

Monday June 5

The day began with a luscious buffet breakfast (included) at the Hotel Meridien where we are staying. Then off to a four hour tour. Most of the tour was by bus, with the last hour being a walking tour of the old city.

The tour was fabulous, taking us all over the city to places where you would need a car for access. We went up on a huge hill commanding great views of the bay (Baie Anges, or Bay of Angels) all the way to Antibes. The houses, the architecture, were fantastic. The yachts parked in Nice Harbor were amazing. We also ventured to Cimiez, the location of both the Matisse and Chagall museums.

Overall impression: of the various big cities we've seen, this is one of the most beautiful. Compared to Bordeaux from a previous trip, Nice is much prettier, and the climate is nicer. We've had sun and highs around 80 each day so far.

After the tour we walked extensively around the old city, and had lunch in a local restaurant there, outdoors of course -- shared a salad Nicoise and a carafe of wine some fabulous bread. Then, exhausted from walking, we limped back to the hotel, and got some additional suggestions for dinner. So, we walked to those restaurants to check locations and menus, then back to the hotel to arrange for reservations.

Note on navigating Nice streets: once you get the feel for the layout of the city, of the old town, and using the bay for orientation, it's quite easy to walk around. When trying to navigate using maps, one thing is very confusing. All the street signs are in two languages: French and Nicoise. Often the only change is the word for street or avenue or square. "rue" translates to "carriera" in Nicoise. But if the street name is a word, it gets translated too. Now it turns out that on most paper maps they print the French name. Google maps uses the Nicoise name. I was trying to find something on a paper map but using Google maps blue dot to figure out where I was. However, it was nearly impossible to match the two sets of street names.

Dinner was at another lovely traditional French restaurant with Nicoise specialties: La Maison de Marie, just a short walk from our hotel and near the old town. We shared an appetizer, foie gras terrine with strawberry chutney, then shared a pasta dish, pici with white truffle cream, and an entree, roasted duck breast with seasonal fruits, and accompanied them all with another local Cote de Provence (red). Desert was "Il mistero secundo Marie", vanilla ice cream wrapped in crushed hazelnuts with meringue and whipped cream. The entire dinner was fabulous; the place is highly recommended. After dinner, more walking around to digest.

Tuesday June 6

We decided to head for the flower market and then Castle Hill. The flower market was 9 or 10 blocks long in a narrow strip just off the old town. Flowers were gorgeous; everything from traditional arrangements to exotic orchids. Flowers were just the first third or so of the market's length, however. We quickly segued to foodstuffs. 17 kinds of cheeses at one booth, 26 kinds of olives at another. Some of the most gorgeous tomatoes, sausages, spices you've ever seen. It was quite a feast for the eyes and the camera.

From there we walked to Castle Hill and decided to climb the 300 steps to the top for the views (along the way as well as at the top) and we were reminded how picturesque the city really is. To quote Laura: "How come more people don't rave about Nice?". We ended our morning by walking all the way out to the Harbor of Nice to look at the boats and yachts.

We finished with a gelato for lunch and headed back to the hotel to get ready for our afternoon tour of Eze, Monaco and Monte Carlo.

In the afternoon we boarded a mini-van and went first to Eze, a quaint and very ancient city built entirely of stone and into the side of a mountain. We had heard great things about Eze, including the fabulous views. So we climbed and climbed (this was a real climbing day) to near the top, then bought tickets for the Exotic gardens which are at the top and renowned for their views.

The gardens were quite fantastic -- every shape and size of cactus, century plant, and many exotic tropical plants I couldn't name. The view from the top truly was magnificent. The rest of the village was mostly touristy now, and although very charming and picturesque, it was filled mostly with tourist shops and artisan and crafts shops.

After Eze we stopped at a perfume factory near Grasse and got a tour, which was quite interesting, of how perfume, soaps, and lotions and oils are made. We saw the equipment, watched some of the craftsmen at work, and tried our noses at identifying smells.

From there, on to Monaco, where we looked at and photographed the palace (not enough time to go in), visited Princess Grace's tomb in the chapel, and ogled the Ferraris, Porsches, Lamborghinis, and even an Aston/Martin that could have belonged to James Bond, parked in front of the casino. The casino itself looked like 007 could have walked out at any minute.

On the drive back we traveled the upper corniche, past the spot where Grace Kelly was killed in an auto accident when her car went over an embankment and 50 feet down a sheer cliff.

Dinner was at a very small but very excellent French restaurant on Rue Grimaldi called "Le Petit Cafe". We shared foie gras with a raspberry gelatin on top that was so creamy and rich it tasted like cheesecake. Then we shared pigeon with local spices and fennel, veal with mushrooms stuffed with basil, and for dessert we shared what was listed as apple pie but was unlike anything I've seen -- candied apples in a kind of crispy pastry basket, with ginger sorbet, and an amaretto cream with meringue and cherries. This was the most upscale, expensive, and fabulous dinner we've had in Nice.

We did the usual walk after dinner, and watched some street performers in Place Massena doing break dancing.

Wednesday, June 7

Departure day from Nice.

Overall impressions of Nice: a beautiful city, it has now become one of my favorites. The scenery, the ambiance, the Mediterranean, the weather, and the FOOD. And WINE. It's a lovely place for dining outdoors, for walking around in the evening and people watching, and for strolling through the old town. We'll miss you!

Arrived Viking Heimdal just in time for a nice dinner and a short evening. Transition days are tiring and this one was no exception.

Thursday, June 8

Our first full day on the Heimdal. After a wonderful buffet breakfast we headed for Arles, the medieval city which became the famous home for Vincent Van Gogh in his final days. We toured the Roman amphitheater and the colosseum, built in 100 A.D. and still in use today. We no longer have gladiator fights but the colosseum is still in use for bullfights and concerts. We toured the rest of this lovely, and very old, town, ending with a tour of a few places Van Gogh painted, including the hospital where he was a patient after cutting off his ear. It was fascinating to see his painting of the view from his room into the courtyard. It looks exactly the same now. He also painted the Cafe Nuit, and it looks exactly the same now.

In the afternoon we took the optional excursion to Le Baux. This medieval town is one of the quaintest in France and one of the most visited. The architecture is lovely and the town is mostly now made up of shops; the twenty or so residents live in the valley below.

A most impressive part of this tour was a light show called Carrières de Lumières. The show is held in a series of underground caves and an amazing light show is presented along with classical music; the space is expansive and the show happens on multiple surfaces simultaneously, with amazing animation and special effects. This show featured the art of Hieronymus Bosch, Franz Brueghel, and Arcimboldo, accompanied

by music by Vivaldi, Carl Orff, and Led Zeppelin. The effect of this one hour show was stunning, but words cannot describe it. Highly recommended!

We returned to the ship for a captain's toast and then dinner. What a dinner! Lobster bisque, quail with asparagus risotto, and chateaubriand, with crepes suzette for dessert. After dinner we watched the ship sail back into Avignon by moonlight. It was quite a lovely event.

Friday June 9

The morning excursion was a walking tour of the ancient town of Avignon, city of the popes. Avignon was home to 7 popes and 2 anti-popes. Our walking tour covered the medieval town of Avignon, visited the church of St. Peter, and the wall (Avignon is a walled city dating back to Roman times). But the highlight of the tour was our visit to the Palais de Papes, the papal palace. The structure dates back to about 1100 and was home to all the famous popes of the period, until Rome reclaimed the right to house the descendants of St. Peter.

After lunch we went to Chateauneuf-des-Papes. Our first stop was a winery where we were treated to an explanation about wine tasting, wine making, and then tasted a young white wine, a 5 year old red, and an 11 year old red. Our excellent guide led us through the steps of evaluating and tasting each of these. After the tasting, we toured the vineyards, learned about the various terroirs, and finally visited the very charming town of Chateauneuf-des-Papes.

We arrived at Heimdal just in time for the returning guests cocktail hour, where we toasted with aquavit. By a show of hands, only two couples had been on 5 trips -- and we were one of them.

For dinner our appetizer was poached scallops in an avocado sauce, white asparagus soup, and I had seared swordfish with an olive crust, and Laura had medallions of filet mignon of pork.

Saturday June 10

Today we are in Vivienne. This charming and very small town of 1800 residents dates back to at least the year 2 A.D. when it was occupied by Romans. The buildings are very old, and there are two watch towers and a medieval church. The entire city is built on top of a huge rock, and today we climbed all the way to the top, to get great views of the town on the way up, and a fantastic panorama from the top. Our tour leader Janie (Jenny) was a wonderful Brit who seemed to know everyone in town and was full of great stories. Fortunately, the walk back to the ship was all downhill. Also fortunately, the temperatures today are staying in the upper 70s so we didn't melt.

Weather note: we have had low 80s and sun all week, and a few days have had the Mistral (French for master), a strong wind that comes in with the change in weather.

Mostly though the weather has been delightful and the breeze refreshing. Forecast is for sunny but hot the remainder of the week. We shall see.

Dinner was wonderful, and very traditional French. For appetizers we shared frogs legs Provencale and an octopus salad in red pepper vinaigrette, which were both lovely, and of course we had to share soupe a la oignon. The main course was a classic boeuf bourguignon; it was super good! Dessert we split the creme brulee and the mascarpone and sour cherry cake with brownie streusel. The evening's entertainment consisted of a game of name that tune, with extra credits for naming the artist and, in some cases, the year it was released; and extra points for dancing. We came in second :-)

Sunday June 11

Today was a busy day, with two tours in the morning and an extended walking tour in the afternoon. At 8:45 in the morning we went on a wonderful walking tour of the very ancient city of Viviers, This was a short walking tour visiting the castle and major churches. After the tour we boarded the bus for the train station where we caught the steam train for the out-and-back tour of the Ardeche river valley; spectacular scenes and a brief stop when the train turned about. In the afternoon we took a bus to Vienne (where we would meet the bus) and walked about the town in the 95 degree heat. We saw the Roman amphitheater where concerts and the annual jazz festival are held; learned about Trompe l'oeil (literally "fool the eye"), where windows, ledges, and personalities were painted in fresco on the sides of buildings. It started with windows, which were painted on to avoid the tax levied on the number of windows in a building. We visited a magnificent basilica and then took a trolley train to the top of the highest hill in Vienne for magnificent views of the surrounding countryside and the twisty Rhone.

Dinner started with fresh mushrooms a la creme, seared crab cake in corn espuna, and a greek salad made with fresh, local olives and feta. Then triple-dipped fried chicken breast with butter asparagas (both green and white), and finished with warm white chocolate mousse with cherries and frozen yoghurt. We finished the evening with the crew playing a game of liars' club which our team lost, and then we finished off the last of the ship's supply of Camus extra elegance cognac (at 350 euros the bottle).

Monday June 12

We arrive in Lyon. What a beautiful city. The morning is a bus tour of the city with various stops for rest and photographs, and then a walking tour of the old city.

Lunch on board is "a taste of Provence", and is a huge smorgasbord of cheeses, regional dishes, breads, pates, and a killer dessert table. After lunch we went out on our own for a 3 mile walk for photographs and intending to have a glass of champagne, but apparently most restaurants are closed, or close early, on Monday so we returned to the ship for cocktails -- gin and tonics on this nearly 90 degree day.

Today is the captain's dinner :-). That means it's nearly time to go :-)

The captain's dinner started with mango escabeche with asparagus salad and raspberry vinaigrette, escargots with garlic, parsley and butter, and a forest mushroom veloute, then a cassis sorbet with sparkling wine. The main course was surf and turf, and desert was a crisp dark chocolate tart with mango salad.

Tuesday June 13

Our last full day aboard. The morning was a bus excursion to Beaujolais wine country, touring the vineyards and then stopping at Chateau de Pierreclos, a medieval castle that has been purchased by a private citizen, restored, and turned into a small appellation. Touring the castle was fascinating; we saw a medieval chapel with stained glass and frescos on the ceiling. We saw the kitchen, the armory (where you could touch the weaponry and armor, and even got to visit the prison. Finally we tasted four reds and a cassis. This excursion was one of the highlights of the trip!

Back to the ship for lunch, and then we walked around town looking for (and finally finding) a place to share a bottle of champagne with good friends Ruth and Phil, did some chocolate shopping, and headed back to the ship for our last dinner: olive roulade with feta, truffle scented chicken cassoulet with mushrooms, and the entree was coq au vin. Dessert was red wine cream.

Wednesday June 14

Viking did its usual outstanding job getting us to the airport and to the correct checkin line. All flights were on time and we were safely back in Boston 10 minutes early, in time to hit rush hour traffic.

Overall impressions: This was probably not our favorite of the Viking cruises we've taken. A real highlight was the time spent in Nice, an incredibly lovely, and lively, city with gorgeous architecture and palm trees and views of the Mediterranean Sea, and lots of great food. While the medieval, sometimes Roman towns of Avignon, Arles, and Le Baux were interesting, they didn't feel quintessentially French. The light show in Le Baux was fabulous, but not particularly French either. Lyon was great, and we really enjoyed the Beaujolais excursion.

The crew was over the top wonderful. The wine list had some great selections, and we were able to sample a Camus Extra Elegance cognac that retails in the US for over \$300 a bottle. The entertainment was very very good — Giles had a good repertoire and a good voice. And the weather — best weather we've ever had for a trip of this length. It never rained a drop; most days were sunny and in the mid-80s with lows in the mid 60s. Two days were actually hot, 93 and 95 respectively, so we had to take it a bit easy and keep hydrated.

