

Provence, France – September 2022

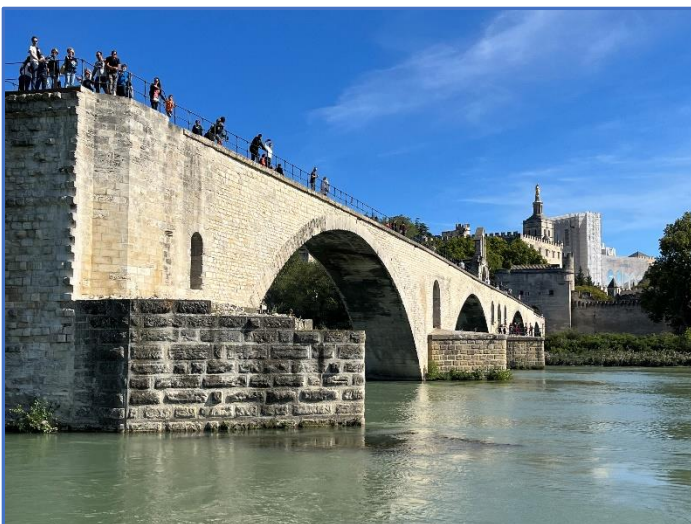
Hmmm ... an email from the airlines early in the morning of our planned departure day saying “flights cancelled – call to rebook” ... could it be a *sign*? Seems a strike by the French air traffic controllers had put the kibosh on our planned Munich to Marseilles flight so our Denver to Munich flight was also cancelled. The good news: we could rebook on a different airline with no additional cost; the bad news: we wouldn’t be departing until the *following* day. So, we merrily hung around home for another day before taking the next day’s flight from Denver to London and subsequently a flight from London to Marseilles. Hmmm ... traveling through London’s Heathrow airport the Saturday before Queen Elizabeth’s funeral on Monday ... the good news: our flights did happen though both were delayed; the bad news: we missed an entire day in Avignon, France so ended up paying for an unused hotel night and a food tour that couldn’t be refunded due to last minute cancellation timing [we have low hopes of getting any reimbursements from the airlines and/or credit card company but have initiated the process anyway].

Avignon (3 nights)

Avignon is considered the gateway to *Provence*, a geographical region and historical province of southeastern France, which extends from the left bank of the lower Rhône River to the west, to the Italian border to the east, and it is bordered by the Mediterranean Sea to the south. Despite a late-night arrival, on our first morning in this charming medieval walled city we joined a wine tasting tour of course! The tour took us to the *Châteauneuf du Pape* area, a short drive from the city. This area has over 300 *caves au vin* or wine caves (the traditional name for a French winery as it refers to an underground cellar where the wine was stored before the advent of temperature-controlled facilities). There, as we had hoped, we tasted some excellent wines at three different wineries. We also toured the *Brotte Wine Museum* for an informational look at the area’s winemaking history. What came as a surprise, was the very rocky soil in which the area’s vines thrived. How these rocks were deposited here involves many elements -- a shallow sea 60 million years ago covering this area and its subsequent recession, the formation of the Alps Mountain range, various ice ages and the formation of glaciers and then the subsequent melting of some of those glaciers. Before returning to Avignon, we toured the ruins/remains of the actual *Châteauneuf du Pape* castle which was unfortunately blown up by the Germans in WWII (they used it as an arms depot and destroyed it upon their retreat).



*Stoney ground surrounding vines in
Châteauneuf du Pape area*

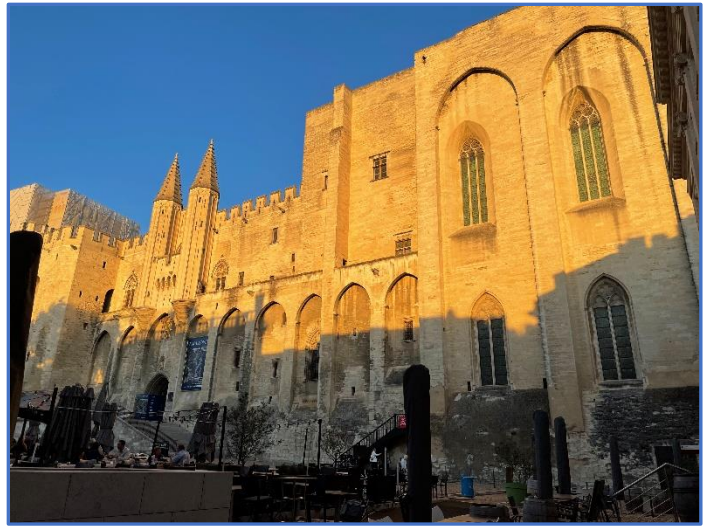


*Pont Saint-Bénézet, begun in 1234 once 22 stone arches, after
multiple Rhone River floods, it is now down to only 4 arches*

Once back in Avignon, we enjoyed very tasty fresh focaccia sandwiches from a very popular walk-up counter before walking down to the Rhone River on a lovely fall afternoon. The *mistral* winds which are common in this area were blowing nicely and one reason for the clear weather. On the Rhone River we enjoyed a bateau (boat) tour and got a nice view of the city from the river as well as partly circumnavigating *Barthelasse Island*, the Rhone’s largest island which sits just off Avignon’s banks. We also got a good view of some of the houseboats which are moored along the island’s banks (cheaper living accommodations than in town but houseboats regularly show they can be moved under their own power and periodically must be pulled from the water for cleaning/inspection). A post-boat ride consumption of gelato helped our flagging, jet-lagged

persons keep upright for a while longer. Viewing the golden light of the sunset on the *Palais des Papes* (the Pope's Palace) was quite magical. We had dinner at one of the many restaurants lining one side of the *Place de l'Horloge* (Clock Tower Square), the city's main square on which its Hotel de Ville (City Hall) is also located.

The next morning, after a much-needed good night's sleep, we enjoyed a wonderful breakfast at the hotel, including *fromage blanc* (a creamy soft white cheese, similar to yogurt) served over a thin layer of local honey (yum). Our "entertainment" during breakfast was watching the local trash-person extract large trash receptacles which were mostly underground – only the deposit box was above ground – all this done via a handheld control device to operate the pickup boom located on the trash truck (so, we're easily entertained!). We then joined a walking tour of the *Palais des Papes*. A UNESCO World Heritage site, it is the largest Gothic palace in the world with over 161,000 square feet of floor space. Its construction began in 1252 and involved 2 main buildings that were eventually combined into one massive building in 1335-1355. During the 14th century, the palace served as the seat of Western Christianity (complicated history of pope power so will leave others to describe). The impressive complex, with its 12 towers, has seen significant renovation work and that work continues today ... Steve remembers visiting in 1992 and noted that considerable renovation work had been completed since that time. Beautifully painted walls, beamed ceilings, and lovely tiled floors are just some of the restored elements. Besides visiting the inside of the palace, we strolled through the palace gardens which were reopened in 2018.



The limestone facade of the Palais des Papes turns golden when the sunset's rays reach it – a sight to behold



Melissa peaking-out of a spiral staircase within the Palais des Papes

After another tasty takeaway lunch from the same busy-as-ever bakery counter, we decided to walk around the entire "walled" part of Avignon, a circumference of 2.7 miles. No one is quite sure when the walls, the *Remparts d'Avignon*, were first built (likely sometime in the 11th or 12th century). There are now 25 entrances in the wall, many of them only small pedestrian entrances though some are large "gates" where roads now enter the city center. At one point we ducked back through the wall at one of these entrances to find the *Rue des Teinturiers* or "Street of the Dyers" which gets its name from the textile industry that flourished here



Looking down from the gardens of the Palais des Papes -- the Pont Saint-Bénézet is in the foreground and Barthelasse Island is beyond

between the 14th and 19th centuries (a dyer is a person whose trade is the dyeing of cloth or other material). It is nicknamed the “street of the waterwheels” in honor of the waterwheels critical to the textile industry. Only 4 waterwheels remain along this charming cobblestone street, in places lined with majestic sycamore trees. We then ducked back outside the wall and continued our circumnavigation of it.



Steve at one of 25 current city entrances in the Avignon city wall



Steve alongside one of the 4 remaining waterwheels along the Rue des Teinturiers

Outside the city walls we see the modern side of Avignon – wide streets, modern buildings, mass transit, etc. of the city with a population of over 475,000. Between the 2 days in Avignon, we ended up walking about a total of 6 miles days ... that earned us a gelato, didn't it?

In the early evening, we met up with the 12 folks with whom we'll

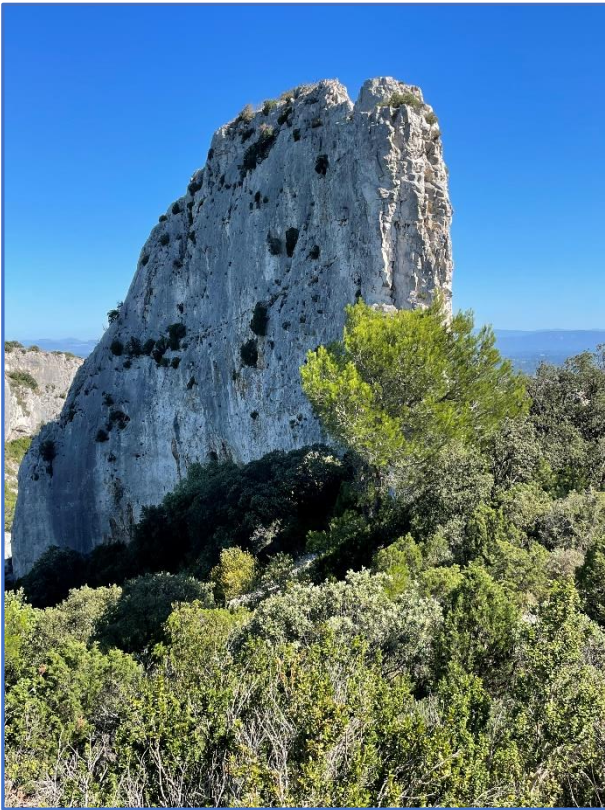
be spending the next several days – exploring Provence as part of a MT Sobek's *Provence Village to Village Hiking* trip:

- Pierre, our lead guide, a certified mountain guide and a Provence resident
- Ludovic, our assistant guide, teacher of *conscious walking* and a resident of the Provence area
- Margaret & Peter, a couple from San Marcos, CA
- Colette & Jim, a couple from Lake View, IA
- Laura & Morgan, a couple from Richmond, VA
- Karen & Will, a couple from Safety Harbor, FL
- Morgan, Karen & Will's daughter from San Francisco, CA
- Mary, Will's sister (Morgan's Aunt) from Walnut Creek, CA

After some wine, introductions and a short briefing on logistics the 14 of us had a short stroll to restaurant for a delicious, but rather lengthy, multi-course meal. Afterwards, we prepped for our departure from Avignon in the morning.

Saint Remy (2 nights)

A short van ride, with Pierre and Ludovic each piloting a vehicle, transports the group from Avignon to the town of *Saint Remy de Provence*, which sits at the foot of the Alpilles Mountains. Although it is not high - some 1,634 ft at its highest point - the Alpilles range stands out impressively, as it rises abruptly from the Rhône. The range is about 15 miles long by about 5 to 6 miles wide. Our destination is the *Parc Natural Regional des Alpilles* where we hiked up to some amazing limestone formations. On a bluebird day, we could see the coast of France and the Mediterranean Sea in the distance



Limestone formation in the Alpilles

while enjoying the graceful turns of several sailplanes. A picnic spread of local breads, cheeses, sausages, melons, tomatoes, olives, chocolate, wine and more (freshly brewed coffee no less) replenished our energy for the return hike. Each of us had our own plastic wine glass, cloth napkin, and set of high-end plastic utensils that we carried in our day packs each day to facilitate our beyond-basics picnics!



Melissa enjoying the view of the Mediterranean Sea in the distance

Our hike ended at the *St. Paul de Mausole Asylum* where Van Gogh admitted himself in May 1889. The psychiatric hospital was founded during the 19th century in an ancient Augustine Monastery nestled among wheat fields, vineyards and olive groves. While there, Van Gogh produced several paintings – all based on what he could see from the barred window of his 2nd floor bedroom, including his bedroom itself.



*Above: Van Gogh painting of his asylum bedroom
Left: Van Gogh bedroom at St. Paul de Mausole Asylum today*

We toured the asylum grounds and building before piling into the vans for a short drive to a family-run farm which produced goat cheese. There we feed the goats and enjoyed their antics as well as those of other animals including

chickens, ducks, and geese. After hearing about the process of making the goat cheese, we had the opportunity to sample the fresh cheese at various stages: 24 hours old, 3 days old, and 5 days old.



Left: Fresh goat cheese

Right: Melissa feeding a goat corn

After settling into our hotel room (home for 2 nights), the *Le Gounod*, we were on our own for dinner. After taking a stroll through the town and seeing a plethora of options, Steve & I decided a “lighter” French dinner was in order. At a casual bistro we enjoyed *galettes* (buckwheat crepes filled with a



variety of savory fillings) and garden-fresh salads -- all washed down with a French cider (has a very low alcohol content). As a large selection of homemade *glace* (ice cream) was available, we availed ourselves! Not sure the day’s hiking stats of 5.4 miles and 885 vertical feet offset all the day’s intake but hey, we were on vacation.

A note about the *Le Gounod* hotel: our room was in the part of the hotel that was originally a 16th century inn. Fortunately, things like indoor plumbing and electricity had since been added for our comfort. However, retrofitting such an old stone building often means creative placement of plumbing pipes, etc. Upon entering the room, we immediately had to take a step up into the room, cross a short vestibule and then take 2 steps down into the bedroom. The toilet was located just off the vestibule – thus, 2 steps up from the bedroom. The sink and shower were located in a separate niche which was one large step up from the bed space. Needless to say, cell phones make great flashlights in the middle of the night 😊

At breakfast, each couple/pair received their lunch assignment – type of item(s) they were to purchase for the day’s communal picnic. Our assignment was “bread” and was to include some *sacristan* (a sweet, twisted puff pastry with almond slivers). With assignment in hand, we wandered out the hotel’s front door and basically arrived at the town’s farmer’s market. How to choose from such a bounty of baked goods available? We ended up getting a variety of baked goods including fig bread, multi-seed bread, various savory focaccia



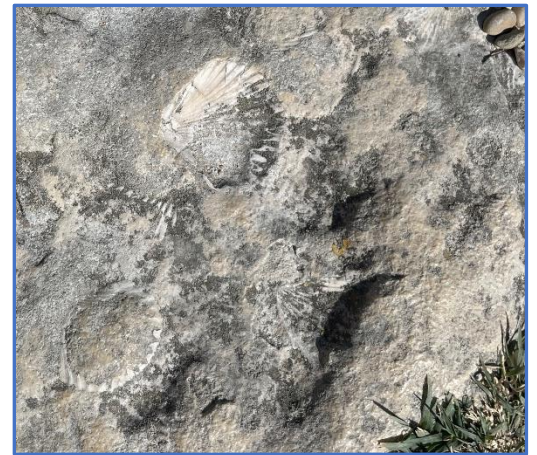
Melissa carrying breads while admiring the fresh flowers for sale



as well as the *sacristan*. Good thing we had an assignment as I could have spent hours perusing all the fruits, veggies, meats, etc. offered at the market.

For today's hike we started right from the hotel – headed through town to a path which took us by a small lake and then up to the crest of the Alpilles where we enjoyed ridge line views of the area. Today's picnic, at a lovely overlook, was a cornucopia of fresh regional products, including wine of course.

To avoid the onset of a food coma, we donned our daypacks and continued our hike down to the 1,000-year-old village of *Les Baux de Provence*, where a few dozen stone homes huddle together high above the valley. The village's narrow streets and stone buildings now mostly serve as shops and restaurants for the hordes of tourists, including us, which visit this picturesque spot. Here, on the stone outside a small chapel, we spotted shell fossils left from the time millions of years ago when the area was a shallow sea. The area is also home to quarries left over from the time of the Roman era (exhibitions are now held in some of the quarries).

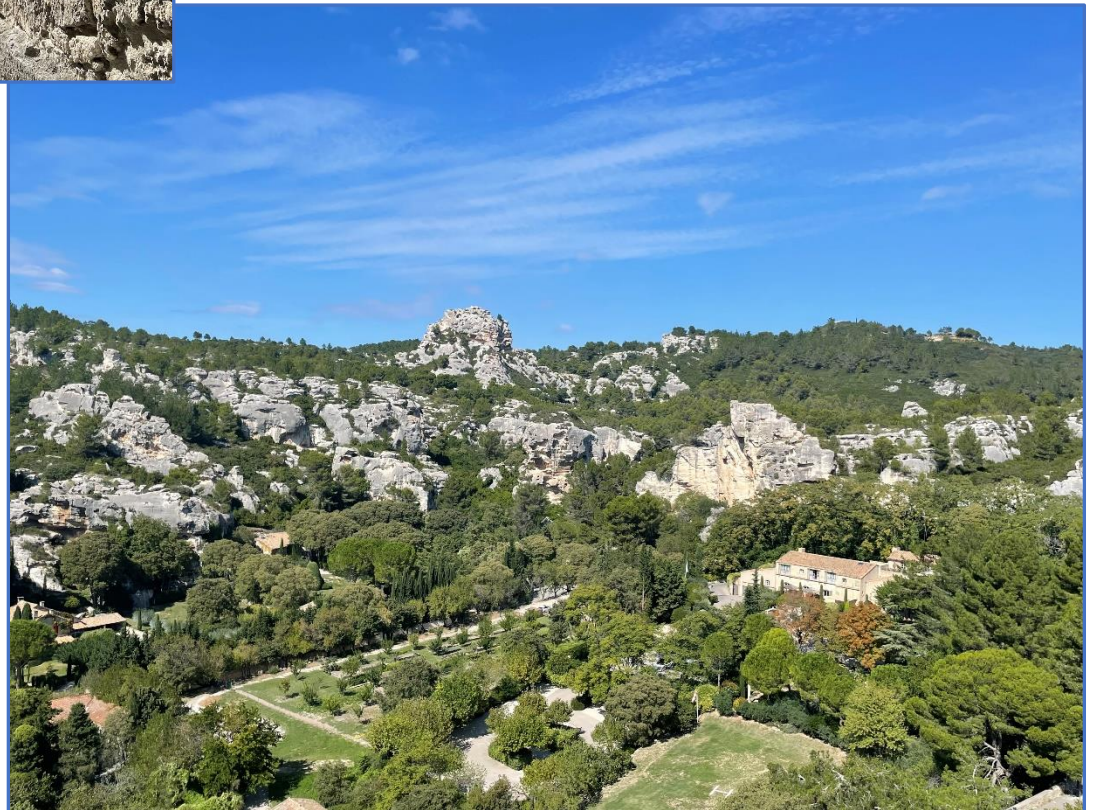


Left: Steve checking out the stone streets in Les Baux de Provence

Right : Shell fossils at Les Baux de Provence



View from Les Baux de Provence – we're thinking of acquiring the small estate seen on the valley floor – anyone have an extra several million dollars to share with us?



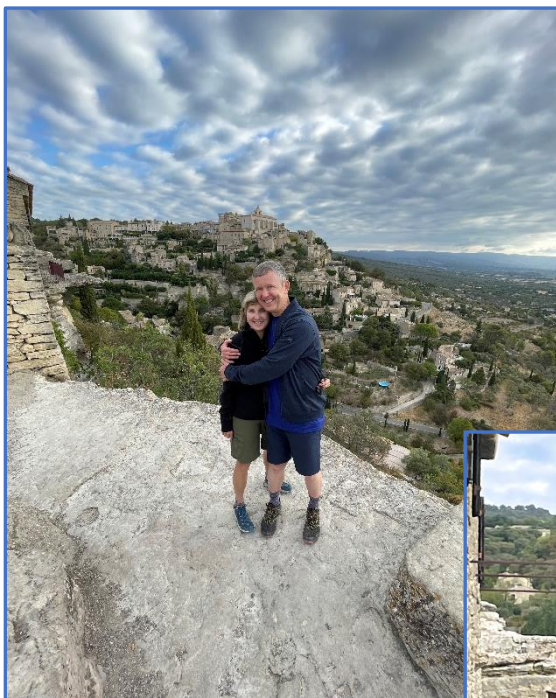
After our visit to Les Baux, we hopped into the vans (which Pierre and Ludovic cleverly parked there in the early morning before the tourists began to arrive) and headed to the nearby, family-run *Moulin Castelas* olive mill. Normally, the olives are harvested in October into November but due to this year's excessive heat, they had started harvesting the olives the day we visited (Sept 21). We watched the olive processing take place and got a tour of the facilities before doing some olive oil tasting. That evening we enjoyed a group dinner back in Saint Remy. Did the day's 7 miles of hiking and 1100 vertical feet earn us the decadent desserts we inhaled on top of full dinners? Probably not, but that didn't stop us.

A note about this hiking trip versus some of the other MT Sobek ones we've done: This trip is rated a "3" on their 1 to 5 effort rating, which is considered to be a *moderate* trip. Most of the other one's we've done have been rated a "4" or *strenuous* trips. So, we knew going in that we'd not be doing either long mileage or significant vertical feet. Instead, we'd enjoy a range of area-appropriate cultural activities in addition to doing some moderate hiking.



Gordes (2 nights)

After breakfast the next day we say goodbye to the Saint Remy/Alpilles area and, via the vans, transfer to the *Luberon* mountains and one of its lofty medieval villages, the village of *Gordes* (elevation 1,224). Gordes' golden-stone buildings perch precariously on the steep slopes of the hill on which the village of less than 2000 sits. We explore some of it's narrow streets while Pierre and Ludovic procure today's picnic fare.



Melissa & Steve with Gordes in background

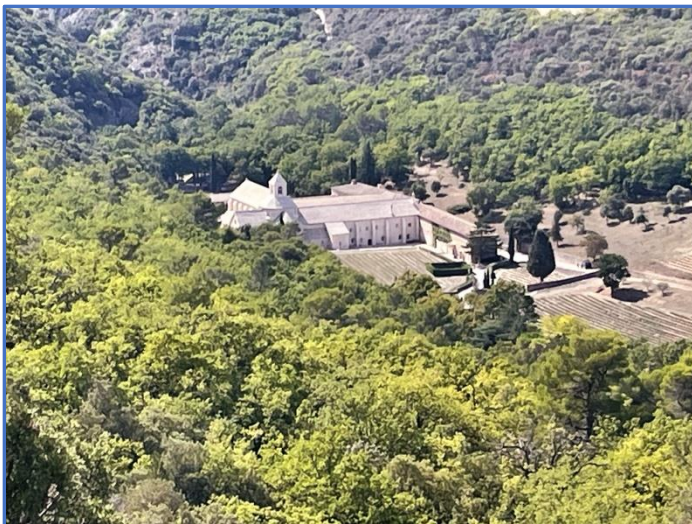
Right: Steve along one of Gordes' steep & narrow roads



Notice the natural stone balconies!

From the village, we set out on the day's hike. It doesn't take long to hike beyond the village proper and into the forest. This area shows the impact of the very hot and dry summer Provence has had – the trees and bushes look a bit bedraggled and parched and the ground is dusty. For lunch, we find an open area and enjoy a very nice repast of local foods including a 93 Euro (approx. \$93) chunk of white cheese embedded with truffles (a pricy delicacy indeed) as well as local beer and fruit juices. The resulting food coma had several of the group literally snoring for a while ...

Refreshed, the group continues to hike, eventually hiking along the edge of a hillside and then down to the valley floor where the *Senanque Abbey* sits. Founded in 1148 by 12 Cistercian monks, the church was consecrated in 1178 with additional buildings/additions added over time. The abbey is of the *Romanesque* style which is characterized by semi-circular arches. The exterior of the main buildings had been recently renovated and the interior of the church is now undergoing major renovations. There are currently 6 monks in residence at the abbey.



Abbaye Notre-Dame de Sénanque as seen from the trail above



Abbey at ground level (unfortunately its lavender gardens were not in bloom)

After a tour of the main buildings, we had the choice of hiking to our hotel (all uphill) and getting a ride back ... Steve & I, as well as several others, followed Ludovic's brisk pace up the hill. At the hotel we had time to clean-up and have an Aperol Spritz on its veranda, before walking into the main part of town with the group for a delicious dinner. The day's hiking stats were 7.5 miles with over 1,250 vertical feet gain.



Abbaye Senanque courtyard with Romanesque arches



Gordes at sunset showing its golden stone buildings

The next morning the group trundled into the vans for a short ride to the village of *Bonnieux*, one of the many “hill villages” of the area (Gordes is included in this grouping). There, we have some time to explore its morning market before splitting the group into those who wish to take a longer, more uphill hike and those who don’t. Steve & I join the longer hike group ... we start right from the village and after a short while we start the gradual climb up the northern slope of the Luberon mountains (max elevation 3,691’). We eventually reach the *Forêt de Cedars* (Forest of Cedars) at 2,385’, that was originally planted in 1861 from trees & seeds brought from the Atlas Mountains in



Cheese for sale at Bonnieux market

Morocco and Algeria. Since then, the trees have thrived and reproduced in the area’s limestone terrain. After a stroll through the forest of cedars, we take a rocky trail downwards and enjoy beautiful russet, gold, and red leaves on fall display. In the village of *Lacoste*, we met up with the other group for an alfresco lunch at a hillside café. Unfortunately, the bees liked my charcuterie board as much as I did (apparently, they are attracted to the meat smells).



Cedar forest started in 1861

A visit to *Les Agnès*, an organic lavender distillery, happened after lunch following a scenic drive of lavender fields, fruit orchards and more from *Lacoste* to the distillery. Since 1895, this family-run enterprise has been distilling lavender. We tour their facilities and get to smell the differences in lavender vs lavandin (a naturally occurring hybrid in the same family as lavender). And, of course, we have time to check out the plethora of lavender-related products available for sale. Needless to say, the smell of lavender was ever-present!

On our drive back to Gordes, we drive through the village of *Roussillon* which is built on top of an ochre cliff face. The place is packed with tourists (and no parking is available) so we enjoy the spectacularly colored cliffs at sunset from the van. Then, it is back to Gordes for another scrumptious multi-course French meal and a celebration of Pierre’s birthday.



Steve checking out the lavender distilling vats

Today’s hiking totals: 7.9 miles and 1,500’ vertical. Note: Pierre and Ludovic introduced us to a new term they used to describe the type of terrain our hikes would or would not include ... some were “steepy” and some weren’t so steepy!

Vaison-la-Romaine (1 night)

We awake to rainy weather so the day's plans are adjusted accordingly as slippery, rocky trails are not on any of our wish lists. This is the last day of the MT Sobek hiking trip and since we've had outstanding weather up until today, we can't really complain about the rain.

A return visit to the ochre cliffs and village of *Roussillon* is first on the revised agenda. Ochre is a series of brown, yellow and red colors that are produced by clay pigments that contain ferric oxide, also known as rust. As seen in the pictures below, it is quite the sight to behold ...



Jim, Colette, Peter, Margaret, Melissa, Steve, Morgan, Will, Karen, Mary, Morgan, Laura, and Ludovic (Pierre is the photographer)



Cicada above doorway

We explore Roussillon's charming streets where the *cicada*, the symbol of Provence and considered good luck charms, can be spotted above doorways. According to Provençal folklore, the cicada was sent by God to rouse working locals from their afternoon siestas to stop them being too indolent.

Next on the modified agenda is a visit to the picturesque village of *Venasque* (one of 126 "most beautiful" villages in France) where we explore the *Notre Dame de Venasque* church with its 17th century altar piece as well as other 15th & 16th century adornments. With continuing wet and cool weather, we had a "Seattle Picnic" in the vans (yummy grilled vegetable pasta salad and caprese salads prepped by our hotel in Gordes). To take the chill off we then enjoyed a hot beverage at one of the town's cafes where local residents and their pets were also escaping the weather!

This woman and her 5 dogs (can only see 3 in this photo) were enjoying the warmth and dryness of a local Venasque café when we stopped in for a hot beverage.



From Venasque we drove to the *Domaine de Mourchon*, a family run winery situated high above the village of *Seguret*. In addition to learning about the vineyards (e.g., grapes from the 1st 7 years of a vine's life cannot be used in the making of wine per strict rules established by the governing AOC, *the appellation d'origine contrôlée*), we also enjoyed some good wine tasting. Another short van ride took us to the village of *Gigondas*. This quaint village with its steep and stone house-lined alleys includes the parish church, *St. Catherine*, with its 14th century façade.

One of many steep alleys in village of Gigondas

A final van ride of the day (and the trip) deposited us at our hotel in the city of *Vasion la Romaine*, jewel of Roman Provence. Our room at the *Hotel Le Beffroi* was reached via a spiral stone stair case (it was originally part of a 16th century building).



Stone spiral staircase in Hotel le Beffroi

Before heading out to dinner, the group gathered to toast a wonderful trip to locally produced and delicious Muscat (especially for those of us who enjoy sweeter wines). On the way to the night's restaurant, we view the Roman bridge built by the Romans in the 1st century AD and which still stands today after many floods, including a devastating one in 1992. A delightful farewell dinner with our fellow hikers and guides brought to conclusion our time in Provence. It was definitely a treat to spend time amongst hilltop villages, undulating vineyards, ochre cliffs, olive tree groves, limestone mountains and so much more.

The next morning, we head back to the airport in Marseilles and start the second part of this trip ... exploring Italy's Tuscany and the Cinque Terre regions.

Final group dinner in Vasion la Romaine

Clockwise from left: Morgan, Karen, Steve, Melissa, Jim, Laura, Morgan, Colette, Margaret, Peter, Will, and Mary

