

Action Ad "Experience" November's Travel Column, 2013

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## The Wonders of Southern France

We recently returned from leading a great group of travelers through the Provence region of France ending with three days in the city of lights, Paris. I am still greeting people with "Bonjour" (hello) and saying "Merci" (thank you).

This tour was in partnership with the *Thelma Sadoff Center for the Arts* and Kevin Miller, Executive Director. Rich in the arts, the tour included visits to the National Museum of Picasso in Antibes, the Maeght Foundation, the Art House, an artist's studio in St. Paul de Vence, a stop in Arles, home of Vincent Van Gogh, viewed a beautiful mural by Marc Chagall and of course, had a tour of The Louvre in Paris. In addition, some visited the renowned Museum Dorsey. A background in art was not necessary to enjoy what we saw since our expert guides Isabella and Boris shared all necessary particulars on not only who the artists were but extras like what they were striving to convey and the material they had available at the time. One of their stories was of Picasso and his use of shipyard paint following World War II. Since barrels of paint that were used for ships were all Picasso had available to him, his paintings reflected darker and less warm colors. While in Vallauris in 1951, Picasso painted his now famous plywood painting of *La Guerre et la Paix*, inside a chapel. Not surprising the colors were dull green, beige and black and the mural itself, covering the entire inside walls curved to a point at the apex of the ceiling, depicts war and peace.

A friend asked what the favorite part of my journey was. This was difficult to answer since there were so many special moments, sights and art experiences. But giving it some thought, and being a person who simply loves to be near water, I have to say it was the absolute beauty of the French Riviera coastline that topped my list. I fell in love with the blue shades of the Mediterranean, the craggy, curving coastline and the yachts, many very large with helicopters sitting on the rear decks, yet they looked like toys in the sea far below. And I'll never forget the mountain towns that dotted the cliffs as we wound our way to Monaco and Monte Carlo. They were absolutely beautiful. Only in America do we think of sandy beaches along the French Riviera....but they are not sandy at all but you'll need to go to our Riviera blog at [www.somedaytravel.com](http://www.somedaytravel.com) to learn what I mean.

On our way to Monaco we stopped at the ancient town of Eze which overlooks the bay called St. Laurent of Eze, first populated around 2000 BC. Our guide advised us it would be a challenging walk up to about 1,400 feet above sea level. We all made the excursion and while some had to pause to catch their breath on occasion, the quaintness, the shops, the beauty and the views made this a memorable part of the tour. We couldn't help but wonder how the residents of today and those over the centuries could have lived here, but they did. There was no level area and the town gathering place was smaller than most of our living rooms back home. It was a small and consisted of a single well. Our guide shared that the well was the focal point, a place where villagers came to get their daily water supply and to share their lives. Today the locals use carts propelled with a small engine to get supplies up to their homes, shops and

restaurants. In its day Eze was a fortress with a turbulent history of Romans, Moors, French and Turkish invasions. In 1860 it became a part of France through a vote by the residents.

After our excursion to the city of Monaco, including Monte Carlo, we departed Nice where we had spent four beautiful and sunny days. We had about a four hour drive to Arles, the home of Van Gogh. He was famous for paintings such as *The Starry Night*, *Café Terrace at Night*, *The Courtyard of the Hospital of Arles* and many other great paintings. We actually stood in front of the Yellow Café and the Courtyard of the Hospital. See our blog for pictures.

We always take into account longer bus trips and make every attempt to break them up into segments no more than 1 ½-2 hours. Our first stop on our way to Arles was at the Chateau Sainte Roseline, Chapel and Winery, which dated back to the 12<sup>th</sup> century. In the chapel is a Chagall mural. We meandered into the Cloistered Courtyard behind the chapel and could imagine the monks who had walked and prayed there over the centuries. The ambience was of sacred silence and beauty. After our tour of the chapel we toured the winery with its stainless steel, ceiling to floor climate controlled containers, used to process the wine. Of course afterwards we enjoyed a wine tasting session and even had time to purchase what we desired. Our second stop was at the olive grove called Moulin Castelas located in Les Baux de Provence France. We walked in the groves, heard about the production process and were able to taste the various olive oils, and pate'.

We arrived in Arles and toured a most beautifully preserved Roman ruins. It included a coliseum similar to the one in Rome but much better preserved but smaller. Today it is used for rodeos and bull fights. Then we experienced what might have been the two highlights of our visit to Arles. Our guide took us to the actual Yellow Café used by Van Gogh for his famous *Café Terrace at Night* painting. Van Gogh himself frequented this very restaurant and where some of our travelers met for dinner and wine later that evening. We then we moved to the actual site of the *Courtyard of the Hospital of Arles* painting where our guide shared the moving story of Vincent Van Gogh's life. It was sad but well received by all of us.

Paris will have to wait for another column. We do have a blog for every trip and the French Riviera is no exception. If you want to read this blog please go to [www.somedaytravel.com](http://www.somedaytravel.com) and click on "BLOGS" then "France Riviera" and enjoy our trip as we experienced it.

Wishing you safe travels where ever you go,

Valerie and Wayne Graczyk

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