Day 1:
Bonjour,
Today should have been the start of my More Travel small group tour from “Provence to Burgundy”. My six American travelers and I are staying home, like most of you, but I thought we could do some virtual traveling following our journey day by day, learning a bit more about French culture, language and history, and meeting some French people along the way.
Hop along on this 12-day tour from Northern Provence to Southern Burgundy. En route!

Le mot du Jour (word of the day): La Provence: The first “province” of the Romans on the other side of the Alps... For your confinement movie and book list: the classic « A year in Provence », by Peter Mayle and the movie « A good year » with Russel Crowe. Provence brings a lot of images to Americans’ mind, and it is big on the international tourist scene. It is also famous for French travelers. On our tour, we are going to explore places well-known to the French but less to Americans...

Vaison-la-Romaine our base town is a quintessentialy Provençal town of 6,000 inhabitants with memorable views (Mont Ventoux: the crazy mountain that Tour de France riders often have to climb), scents (olive oil, soap, lavender...), flavors (tapenade, herbes de Provence, ratatouille...) and Roman history. The origin of the first part of the town’s name is debated, with our long and rich history it is sometimes hard to know where names really come from, but the second part leaves no doubt: “La Romaine” was added to Vaison in 1924 to celebrate its origins.

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Composed of two parts today (lower and upper towns), Vaison-La-Romaine can summarize French history and urbanism in five steps:

- **1st**: the Celts settled on the hill
- **2nd**: the Romans built their town by the river, creating a mini-Rome
- **3rd**: with the fall of the Roman Empire, Christianity became the new ruling order. Roman ruins were used for new purposes: a cathedral for example
- **4th**: in the late Middle Ages, with instability in France, inhabitants moved back to the top of the hill abandoning the lower Roman town
- **5th**: After the wars of Religion (16th century), peace came back and the locals built their new town down by the river on top of the Roman ruins

By the early 20th century, there is common interest in archeology and about our past and Vaison becomes the biggest excavation site in France. Today Vaison-La-Romaine is a mini quiet Rome to enjoy the relaxing pace and authenticity of Provence.

**La rencontre**: I am a big fan of B&B and meeting the locals when traveling. Today I would like you to meet Anne et Laurent our hosts in Vaison. For 15 years, this sweet couple has been welcoming guests in their cozy home. Anne has a passion for food and went back to school to get an official degree in cooking (in France you cannot just call yourself a chef, a degree proves that you are qualified). She makes the best
homemade provençal meals. Laurent, along with running the B&B, helps people discover and understand the Côtes-du-Rhône wines.
DAY 2:
Orange is famous for having the best-preserved Roman theater in Europe and the best Triumphal arch in France. But let’s start with our “Mot du jour”: why is the town named “Orange”? They do not grow orange trees there; neither are the houses painted in an orange hue, they like pastel colors in Provence, but that’s not the reason.
History again: in the 16th century, this was an independent territory given to the “Prince of Orange”, heir to the Dutch king, at the time most of this region was under Papal influence, but Orange was independent...

Many Roman ruins have been forgotten and destroyed over the centuries in the world. Why is Orange’s theater still standing with its imposing wall intact? When there is a new use for something, why destroy it... In the Middles Ages Orange, like most towns in France, was surrounded by protective walls. The Triumphal arch became one of the entry points into the town, and houses were built inside the theater for protection, and therefore these two Roman monuments got a new purpose and survived.
According to Louis the 14, the Sun King, the theater’s wall was “la plus belle muraille de mon royaume” (“the finest wall in my kingdom”).
Repurposing is also why we still have amphitheaters in great conditions in nearby Nimes and Arles. It makes me wonder about what parts of our urban surroundings will be left in 2,000 years...
Today, the oldest French music festival, 150-year old, still takes place every summer in the antic theater: it’s called “les Chorégies d’Orange” (from Greek «choreos») and features opera and classical music. 8,300 people enjoy the acoustic quality of the original wall, sitting where people sat 2,000 years ago (Listen to part of Carmen at the theater in 2004).

My favorite moments in Orange:
Back in 2003 when I used to teach in Montana, we took our middle school students on a 12-day tour of France-Germany-Spain (yes... crazy foreign language teachers!). The local kids in Orange were having their talent show on the antic theater stage. I remember my students being amazed that 21st century students were using a 2,000-year-old monument. They were comparing it to their Bozeman’s community center stage where they would perform later their talent show.... Was there more drama or comedy in Orange?

More recently and as a guide: I love exploring the shadowed back streets of this working town after another wow visit of the theater, finding a terrace and sipping on a freshly squeezed orange juice watching people, listening to their southern accent, debating their last “pétanque” or “boules” (similar to bocce ball) game. Any favorite moments in Orange you want to share?
Day 3:
What would Provence be with its historical monuments, landscapes, food, but without wine? The Côtes du Rhône wines with the famous villages of Châteauneuf-du-Pape, Gigondas, Vacqueyras, etc... are right here in Northern Provence.

I know that for new world wine drinkers French wine labels may seem obscure. Grape varietal is not what matters to us, “terroir” is, and that’s our “mot du jour”. “Terroir” comes from the word “La terre” = ground, earth... because no matter what grape varietal you plant, the ground will shape its characteristics. The concept of “terroir” encompasses the soil, but also the local climate, and the art of the wine maker. You would not want to listen to a symphony having only the brass instruments and skipping the wind and string instruments? Same with wine, you need all these factors to make a specific wine.

In addition, many French wine regions are known for blend wines and not single varietal wine. That's the case of our famous Pope’s wine: 13 grape varietals are allowed in the making of Châteauneuf-du-Pape; nine for red Châteauneuf (black grenache, syrah, mourvèdre, cinsault, counoise, muscardin, vaccarèse, terret) and five for white Châteauneuf (roussanne, Clairette, bourboulenc, picpoul, picardan). Don’t tell me you did not know there was white Châteauneuf-du-Pape? One of my favorite wines...

So of course this makes it difficult for Merlot, Cab, Chardonnay fans to understand French wines. Most French people have a mental wine map in their head (see photos). That’s a basic map though. Each wine region is then divided into small regions, divided into smaller regions (think opening Russian dolls...). Some are the size of a village, like Séguret –what we are drinking today with our Provençal picnic), and some the size of just a wine plot! Taste, taste and taste more: it helps
learn the map! And of course match the local wine with the local food, that’s the best definition of « *Terroir* ».

So what are we having for lunch to day to go with our local Côtes-du-Rhône wine? The weather is fine, blue sky, slight breeze (not that crazy Mistral wind): let’s have a “pique-nique”! “Taboulé”, saucisson, “tarte aux légumes” (a colorful vegetable tart), “caillette” (typical pork and spinach meatball), fougasse (typical bread from Provence), fresh “salade verte” drizzled with olive oil, a goat and ewe cheese tray (no cow cheese in the south), and Strawberry panna cotta for dessert....

Miam Miam..
La rencontre: Let’s meet Denis today.

He keeps alive two symbols of Provençal culture: olive oil and “santons”. All countries bordering the Mediterranean Sea grow olives. Provence has a small but distinctive production of olive oil. Like wine, oil can be tasted, and when you enjoy your olive oil back at home it always brings back travel memories… Denis selects and promotes local olive oils, but his main passion is making “santons”. In the local language “santon” means “little saint”, the small painted or dressed clay figures people put on their Nativity scene around Christmas. In Provence the typical characters are obviously present to welcome baby Jesus (Mary, Joseph, the donkey, etc...), but the Nativity also takes on a completely different dimension and, as Denis explains, the whole village comes to see a newborn here. That means the miller, the baker, the herbalist, the old couple, the fisherman, etc..
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Denis creates his own “santons” based on real people of his village. These are passed on from one generation to the next. Part of his job is to give life to these figures and to repair them so they can be passed on!

Do you have original “santon” pictures to share?

Before we leave Provence, let’s talk about its language. We pretty much all speak the same way in France. There is a renewal for regional languages, languages that the government tried (managed) to crush down in the 1920s, but we all speak French now (unlike in 1789, by the time of the French Revolution, when only about 10% of the population spoke French!). In Provence, they have their own regional language that you see on many street signs, but in addition locals do not speak French the way we speak it just north of Provence. They have a singing accent that tells non-Provençal people that they are in Provence, a bit like a southern twang.
If you speak some French, here is how Provençal would sound different:
Pain ➔ [Paing]
Vin ➔ [Ving]
But I love how this woman recites a poem talking about accents, with her southern accent! (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Mp5AqfaRVg )
Day 4:
Today we leave Provence by crossing the Rhône river and entering the Ardèche department (France is divided in administrative regions, divided in departments-like States and Counties in the US). For French people, Ardèche means nature at its wildest, the place where the hippies would go to raise goats back in the 1970s. There are still goats today, no more hippies, but people who enjoyed tranquility and nature.

On our way to the gorges of the Ardèche River, a mini Grand Canyon, we will pass through several villages:

-Pont Saint Esprit is where the Bouvier family is from. Do you know Michel Bouvier? He was the great-great-grand-father of one of your first ladies (can you guess which one?) and the cabinetmaker of Pont Saint Esprit.... For some people, this pretty town on the Rhône river may have another American connection.... linked to an old conspiracy theory... but I let you read about it!

Next comes Aiguèze one of “Les plus beaux villages de France”/ One of "the most beautiful villages of France". There is an independent association which aim is to promote small and picturesque villages of quality heritage. The village must not have more than 2,000 inhabitants and have at least two protected areas. Aiguèze, at the end of the Gorges, is one of the 158 villages bearing this label. More travel to plan ahead!

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But our destination today in Ardèche are the Gorges. The 20-mile long road along abrupt cliffs was not built until 1969, and then, the hippies came ;-).

To make it brief:
--110 million years ago, southeastern France was a sea, with time creating a limestone floor.
--Six million years ago, continents moved, the sea went away, the Pyrenees and Alps mountains pushed towards each other, and boom the Gorges were created with the power of river erosion giving birth to one of the biggest canyons in France, a pretty cool natural arch and dozens of caves to explore.
Mot du jour: “la Châtaigne” (chesnut). Ardèche is the biggest producer of chestnuts in France (half the French production with 5,000 tons/year). That's a lot of chestnuts; what do we do with them? Chesnut cream (better for the environment than Nutella’s palm oil inducing deforestation...), chestnut liquor (to make “Kir”: the most typical French aperitif drink is usually made with 1 volume of black currant liquor and four volumes of dry white wine- here in Ardèche they replace the black currant with chesnut), chestnut soup, bread, etc... but we also roast them and eat them as a snack in winter to warm up. All over Paris in December, you will see “les vendeurs de marrons”, chestnut sellers (“marron” is the fruit of another tree that is
not edible... but roasted chestnuts are called “marrons” just to make non-French speakers confused).

**Favorite memory:** roasting chestnuts in the fireplace at my grandmother’s when I was a kid. Every farm had one of these special chestnut-roasting pans. They would make a special pop (kind of like the sound of a champagne cork) when they were ready...

Any “châtaigne” recipe to share?
Day 5:
What were you doing on December 18, 1994?

While I was getting ready for my first Christmas break of my first year in High School, Jean-Marie Chauvet, along with two other spelunkers, discovered a new cave in the Ardèche department. Its natural entrance had been blocked for about 17,000 years, leaving prehistoric art intact. They discovered paintings representing more than 400 animals, of 14 different species: cave bears, woolly mammoths, lions but the horses are the most emblematic in this cave.

The “Grotte Chauvet” or “Cavern of Pont d’Arc” (named after the nearby arch we saw yesterday) is the oldest decorated cave known so far in France. Guess what, within a week after the discovery the state closed it to preserve it forever, and not repeat the mistake of Lascaux (a cave in south-western France Dordogne area), damaged by the high concentration of CO2 due to the presence of too many visitors.

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Before the "Grotte Chauvet" was discovered, archeologists thought that anything before Lascaux’s art (~17,000 years old) would be cruder, more basic, but 36,000 years ago the techniques were already mastered. Our question now: when is the beginning of art?

In 2014, 20 years after the discovery, a magnificent state of the art replica opened a couple miles away from the original cave. Scientists and artists have faithfully reproduced what our ancestors created 36,000 years ago, in order to let us appreciate their art...

Only about a hundred people a year can enter the original cave, you either have to be a scientist, one of the three discoverers (or one of their close family members) or the French President...
But you can still visit it silently with this video...
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dGn7KnAxUT8

After our comprehensive tour of pre-historic art, we make our way north driving through the Ardèche department, admiring the nature surrounding us and stopping at one more “plus beau village de France” before reaching the Rhône river again in Tournon-sur-Rhône, our new home.

Le “Mot du Jour”: "la cave": that’s where we store our wines; we see pre-historic paintings in “la grotte”...
We are all caveman and cavewoman these days, hopefully with lots of wine stored...