



{FRANCE}

Provence by Bike

If you come seeking gold, you'll not be disappointed. The gold, that is, of sun and sunflowers, and as van Gogh painted them.
By Duncan Christy | Photography by Rob Howard

WHEN OUR FRIENDS ASK US ABOUT OUR TRIP TO PROVENCE we say, "The trip was so romantic we decided to get married."

This is not chronologically accurate. It wasn't until several weeks after we'd returned, bathed in the very essence of what Provence is and what it represents, that I looked at the beautiful, brilliant blonde I'd been riding beside so amiably for a week's time, and decided to "pop the question." I wasn't taking no for an answer, which I made clear by beginning my troth with a postcard from a market in Saint-Rémy-de-Provence. It is so very French: a white background with black upper-lower case slender letters posing this question: "*Veux-tu m'épouser?*" Beneath that phrase are two red cubes to indicate where you'll opt to put your check mark. One says, "*Oui.*" The other also says, "*Oui.*" >>>

To say that Provence is rich is a banality. But that is what this very old region of France ultimately is: rich in everything a traveller could want.

And “oui,” I’m happy to tell you, is what she said.

Was it Provence that had so seduced my darling? Let’s examine what it was that Provence had offered us: hot, clear days of autumn harvest, a cloudless blue sky, the brisk touch of the mistral wind when it blew, the superb network of small under-travelled paved roads that make bicycle riding so pleasurable and easy and safe in this very old region of France. For starters.

To say that Provence is rich is a banality. But that is what it ultimately is: rich in everything a traveller could want for a trip that embraces all of the centuries that we know. In chronological order we’d cite the geology, reaching from the depths of the snaking Gorges de la Nesque, this region’s Grand Canyon, to the heights of Mont Ventoux, the mountain “beyond category” that even Lance Armstrong has feared in ascending and then descending. We’d cite the history, enriched by the hard-working, city- and government-minded Romans, building the astounding aqueducts which centuries later still dominate the skyline with their lattice of arches. We’d cite the agriculture which begets the cuisine which includes the wine and the olive oil and the cheeses and the honeys and the everything else. We’d cite the very proper French, an elegant and fastidious people who shutter their homes at midday and midnight with actual shutters, sealing the world out and themselves in. And then paint those shutters in bright hues, Provençal hues, to set off the otherwise dull-hued stone construction of their houses.

Ah, yes, Provençal hues. Soon to be dead at 37, nevertheless Vincent van Gogh found Provence in the last full year of his life, confining himself to the hospital in Saint-Rémy where he merely produced some 50 canvases between bouts of epilepsy and depression. We remember him rightly as a painter. But he was



also a superb writer, a diagnostician of colour. Try this, I say, holding it to you as I would an hors d’oeuvre of local olive tapenade: “the golden tones of every shade: green gold, yellow gold, pink gold, bronze- or copper-coloured gold and finally from the yellow of lemons to the lusterless yellow of a heap of threshed grain.” It is van Gogh describing what his canvases showed was a favourite colour, perhaps the favourite colour, and that he saw everywhere around him in Provence.

So did we. And we saw those golds in exactly the right fashion to see them: sauntering by on good bikes with good, amusingly precise instructions. Here was one: “600 m later, at the roundabout with the stone hut, take the 4th exit, effectively turning LEFT on ‘rue du 19 Mars 1962.’”

We had such an instruction—and many others like it—because we were in the care of Butterfield & Robinson, the premier providers of luxury bicycle touring. The Toronto, Canada-based firm offers tours that span the globe, reaching anywhere there are paved surfaces that can safely be pedalled or walked by adventurous travellers.

And where there’s history and gastronomy and culture worth digesting.

“France was made for us,” George Butterfield announced on our first afternoon, keeping himself securely in the middle gears of his 27-gear touring Cannondale as we rode. Once a lawyer,

The Flowers That Be
Is it any wonder that romance blossoms so easily in this landscape of sunflowers and tables set with peerless gastronomy.

he found a more pleasurable calling in building B & R with his partner Sidney Robinson—and with a talented lass named Martha, Sidney’s sister, who finally yielded to George’s own blandishments and decided to take his last name. He’s a seductive one, this George, in his firmly masculine Canadian

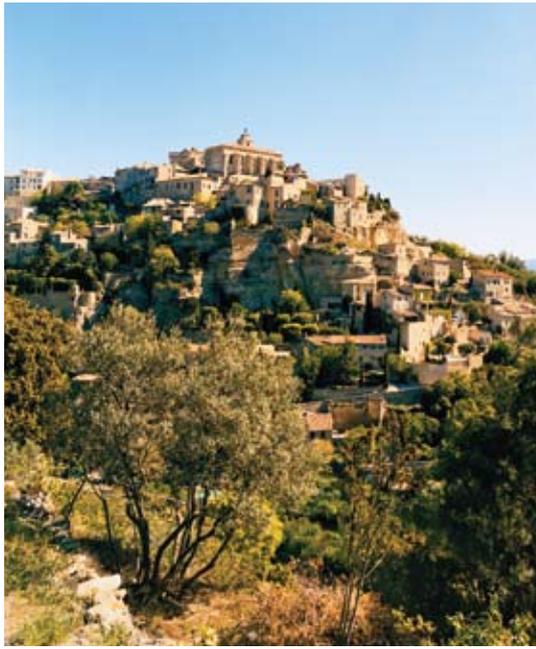
In France we rode along roads that farmers had for centuries plied with wooden wagons, that soldiers had marched on because there were no other conveyances.

way, unapologetically offering up the acme of nectar and ambrosia that any region will have to offer. We laughed about riding on “The Tour de Plaisir,” borrowing on more famous bicycle races held on this bicycle-mad continent. That’s exactly what it was, though, from morning till night, from start to finish, through every bum-testing climb and every vertiginous descent: the Tour de Plaisir.

What Monsieur Butterfield means is that France was made for cyclists. You couldn’t do in most places in the United States, for example, what is so very easy in Europe because the communities are simply too dispersed, too far apart, and the heavily travelled roads therefore too generally hazardous. But in France we rode along narrow roads that farmers for centuries plied with wooden wagons and *chevals*. That soldiers had marched on because there were no other conveyances except for the generals and the viceroys. They blade through fields of wheat and produce, through orchards of olives and grapes and other confiture-producing fruits. They widen as they approach villages, often flanked by a symmetry of cypresses, and narrow after. On a 27-gear Cannondale set up specifically for you, they are a total delight to tread.

And then get off of. That would be after a 50-kilometre day, perhaps, that made you glad you’d purchased the padded shorts. Or simply, impulsively, to stop.

And so we did when we rounded a corner somewhere between Saint-Chaptes and Sainte-Eulalie. It was a beautiful day in mid-September. There were going to be 49 kilometres of riding



À La Bicyclette

The smart play regarding the superb mountain village of Gordes is to find a ride up before bicycling down.

overall, so we were taking our time, having in mind this admonition from our cool Canadians in the Provence booklet: “Riding in an easy gear makes hills much easier—remember, there is no need to strain yourself. You are on vacation, after all.”

Suddenly around a narrow bend there was a field of sunflowers, much as van Gogh would have seen them. For us it is more normal to see a sunflower or two in a bouquet at a florist. Or, perhaps, a narrow ridge of sunflowers planted protectively and ornamentally in a backyard garden. But here was an

entire field of sunflowers, hectares and hectares of them, swaying slightly in the soft morning breeze, their drooping seed-studded heads bobbing hypnotically. They are almost as tall as humans, these *tournesols*, and *ma belle douce* disappeared into them. She was picking carefully, weaving a few smaller flowers into a garland for the hair she’d braided to keep out of her eyes and face while riding. In the distance were two stone farmhouses of a traditional construction. We thought of van Gogh, naturally, of the sunflower yellow he so prized in his worship of what was for him “gold.”

And then, smitten, sated, together we rode on.

Duncan Christy is the editorial director of Four Seasons Magazine.

COUP DE PÉDALE

Should you wish to bicycle locally, your Chef Concierge will be happy to arrange excursions for you. Please inquire. | **A**nd do wear a casque—a helmet! | **F**or more information about the estimable Butterfield & Robinson, www.butterfield.com | **P.S.** “Did you get engaged in France?” a colleague asked upon hearing our happy news. I thought for a second, and of those red cubes on the postcard and decided upon a little “romantic licence”: “Oui!” I said. “Oui!”