TOUR CODE

XFR

ADVENTURESABROAD

PROVENCE HILL WALKER

Ah! Provence

11 days

Updated 11/12/2013

Day 1 *Arrival in Nice*

Today we arrive in Nice, France (probably via Paris) and transfer to our hotel.

Nice is the main town of the Cote d'Azur (also known as the 'French Riviera'). The old town clusters round the base of the 90 m (300 foot) Chateau Hill. Although the castle itself was destroyed in 1706, the wide platform on the summit of the hill affords an almost 360 degree view of Nice and the Bay of Angels on which the town sits. From the tight labyrinth of narrow streets in the vieille ville broad avenues radiate into the new town with its magnificent squares and gardens.

Overnight in Nice. Meal plan: Dinner, if required.

Day 2 *Nice - Gigondas - Vaison-la-Romaine*

After an early breakfast at our hotel, we proceed to a point just outside of Vaison-la-Romaine to the trailhead of the Grande Randonnee, a network of marked hiking trails throughout France (approx 3 hours drive).

Our hike today is through the foothills of the Dentelles de Montmirail Range and overlooks the valley of the Ouzere River, with its fertile vineyards, orchards, and picturesque villages. "Dentelle" means lace and these lace-like (or, to be more accurate, teeth-like) formations tower above us as we walk.

We'll stop for a picnic lunch en route and pass through the fortified town of Sequeret where you can do a little exploring and purchase a cold drink. Our day's walk ends in Gigondas, a village inhabited since prehistoric times. We'll enjoy the fine view from the castle ramparts and perhaps sip a glass of the wonderfully complex and aromatic Gigondas red wine.

We return to Vaison-la-Romaine for dinner and our overnight.

Overnight in Vaison-la-Romaine. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 3 *Vaison-la-Romaine - Crillon Le Brave - Beaumes-de-Venise*

A short morning bus ride takes us to Crillon Le Brave, a charming village on the slopes of Mont Ventoux. We hike along a graded dirt road up to a plateau with wonderful views of the area then descend through a forest to Lac du Paty, a small local reservoir. We enjoy views of the Dentelles and the surrounding hills. This is a relaxing walk with a gentle grade. We continue down through the forest to the main road. We cross the road and hike up to Le Barroux. Time permitting, we make a brief visit to the Chateau at the top of the town. The 16th-century fortification, restored for the fourth time early this century, dominates the landscape and we'll enjoy fabulous views from the watchtower. Here we can also sample the wonderful traditional walnut or olive bread from the Monastery Sainte-Madeleine.

We continue down through chestnut and pine forests to Beaumes-de-Venise, enjoying good views of the Dentelles de

Montmirail. En route we can explore some caves that have been carved out of sandstone rock. Sheltered from the mistral winds, Beaumes-de-Venise is warm and sun-drenched, a perfect place to end our day's excursion. We may visit the wine museum and have a taste of the renowned Beaumes-de Venise aperitif, a fragrant and refreshing drink made from the local Muscat grapes.

Overnight in Beaumes-de-Venise. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 4 *Beaumes-de-Venise - Gordes*

A morning transfer takes us to L'Ile-sur-la-Sorgue, a pretty town with tiny streets and winding canals. We stop for lunch and provisions at one of the local markets and perhaps shop for other items such as "santons", the famous figurines of Provence. We drive to Fontaine de Vaucluse to begin our day's hike. Before setting off we'll visit the natural spring that makes this place famous and perhaps explore the mysteries of water-eroded caves at the Speleology Museum.

Our hike begins right from the main "place" (square) of the town and leads past the outskirts of the town up into the rugged hills overlooking it. We gradually make our way along a steep path to the crest of a ridge. From the top we'll have good views of the valley below and see just how far we've come. We continue around the ridge and descend to the 12th century Abbey de Senanque with its wonderful lavender fields brilliant in the early days of the summer. Our vehicle will pick us up here and transfer us to Gordes, the hilltop village that will be our home for the next two nights. (6 hours, 14 km / 9 miles).

Overnight in Gordes. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 5 *Gordes - Joucas - Roussillon - Gordes*

We begin the day with a visit to a nearby-reconstructed Village des Bories, a grouping of stone huts ('bories'), that were built sometime between the Iron Age and the 18th century. These fascinating structures were constructed without mortar using thin wedges of the local limestone. We transfer back to Gordes and begin hiking down to the south side of the town and along a fairly level path (some of it paved) to the town of Joucas.

Our trail hugs the foothills on our left and we'll have continuous views of the wide valley to our right, dominated in the distance by the hilltop village of Roussillon, our destination for the day. Roussillon is so named because of the warm russet, violet, and yellow ochre hues of its buildings. On a short hike beyond the village we'll see the famous ochre quarries that have been in use since the times of the Romans. We return to Gordes for dinner and our overnight.

Overnight in Gordes. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 6 *Gordes - Les Baux - St Remy de Provence*

A morning public bus journey of about an hour takes us to the medieval hilltop village of Les Baux and the ruins of its 10th century fortress from where the lords of Les Baux once ruled the surrounding lands with terror. Once the home to Celts, Romans medieval troubadours and kings, the village is now a showcase for local artisans and artists. We have the morning to explore the old citadel on a guided visit and do some shopping. After lunch in one of the cafes we walk up the road, passing the Cathedrale d'Images (bauxite quarries). Our hike begins on a ridge overlooking Les Baux on one side and the valley of the Rhone River on the other. A fairly level graded dirt trail leads past a fire lookout then descends easily through a forest of Aleppo pines and oak trees to a pond formed by the Peirou Dam, built by the Romans as a reservoir for the nearby town of Glanum.

A bit more hiking can continue around the right side of the lake and up to the base of the surrounding rocky ramparts. After a bit of scrambling, we arrive at a ‘chimney' with a fixed ladder that will take you to the other side of the rocks. This part of the hike is slightly challenging, though not too difficult. It takes about half an hour. A quick jaunt down the road brings us to the fascinating ancient Roman village of Glanum, where we'll enjoy a guided tour. Time permitting, we'll also visit the Monastery of St-Paul-de-Mausole, the convalescent home where Van Gogh spent some time, with an option to have a guided walk through the sites painted by Van Gogh during his two-year stay here. Continue another ten minutes down the road to our hotel in St Remy. After freshening up, we can walk to town (5 minute walk) and do some exploring before we visit a restaurant for dinner. St Remy is famous for its fine restaurants.

Overnight in St Remy. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 7 *St Remy - Arles - St Remy*

The morning is free to do some shopping and sightseeing in St Remy, a very picturesque and charming town. Be sure to check out the beautiful Provencal fabrics in the boutiques of Souliedo and Olivades. After lunch in town (on your own), we'll drive to nearby Arles where we'll enjoy a guided walking tour of the historic centre and see some of the places that inspired Van Gogh's paintings. We may also have some free time to visit some of the museums or do additional shopping. We return to St Remy.

Overnight in St Remy. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 8 *St Remy - Avignon - Paris*

After breakfast at the hotel, we transfer back to Avignon and depart on the TGV for the four-hour ride to Paris.

In Paris, we first visit the Eiffel Tower. Except for perhaps the leaning Tower of Pisa, this is the single most recognisable structure of the world. Weighing 7,000 tons but exerting about the same pressure on the ground as an average-size person sitting in a chair, the tower was never meant to be permanent. Gustave Alexandre Eiffel, the French engineer whose fame rested mainly on his iron bridges, built it for the World Exhibition of 1889. (Incidentally, he also designed the framework for the Statue of Liberty.)

We then head to the Arc de Triomphe from which 12 avenues radiate, and walk down the Champs Elysees. It has been called "the highway of French grandeur". This street has witnessed some of the greatest moments in French history and some of its worst, such as when Hitler's armies paraded down the street in 1940. Louis XIV ordered construction of the 1¾ km (1.1 mile) avenue in 1667. Originally called the Grand-Cour and designed by Le Notre, it was renamed Champs-Elysees after the Elysian fields (the home of the virtuous dead) in 1709.

We stroll along the street in Hades. On one side it's a chestnut-lined park, on the other a commercial avenue of cafes, cinemas, and boutiques, and even hamburger joints. We stay on the left and when we reach Rue de Berri, we turn left to no. 20, site of Thomas Jefferson's residence from 1785 to 1789. We then head back down the Champs Elysees.

We continue down the avenue until we reach avenue Winston-Churchill on our right. Pausing for a view, we cross to the other side of the avenue and go along avenue de Marigny. On our right we find the Palais de L'Elysee, the "French White House", whose main entrance is along fashionable Faubourg St-Honore. Napoleon abdicated here. Now occupied by the president of France, it can't be visited without invitation. Back at rond-point and avenue Winston-Churchill, we come to the Grand Palais constructed for the World Exhibition of 1900, along with the Petit Palais, which now houses the Musee d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris. We will visit the museum time permitting.

We then reach the Place de la Concorde, an octagonal traffic hub built in 1757 to honour Louis XV. The statue of the king was torn down in 1792 and the name of the square was changed to place de la Revolution (following the Reign of Terror in 1795, it was named Place de la Concorde). Floodlit at night, the square is dominated by an Egyptian obelisk from Luxor, considered the oldest man-made object in Paris. It was carved around 1200 BC and presented to France in AD 1829 by the Viceroy of Egypt. During the Reign of Terror, the dreaded guillotine was erected at this spot and claimed the lives of thousands of people.

Overnight in Paris. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 9 *Paris - Versailles - Paris*

This morning we head to Versailles in the Yvelines, 21 km (13 miles) south of Paris.

Many consider Versailles the most magnificent of all French chateaux, but its beginnings were modest enough. In 1624, Louis XIII had a hunting lodge built on a hill above the small village of Versailles. It became a favourite retreat of the young Louis XIV who began enlarging it during the 1660s. By 1682 he had created a palace whose splendour would help him earn the title the "Sun King" and the town and chateau of Versailles became the French court's new home. Besides a nucleus of a thousand nobles, Louis XIV's retinue consisted of some 9,000 men-at-arms and an equal number of servants. At any given moment between 5,000 and 6,000 people were living here, which only begins to suggest the scale of this royal commune.

Before crossing the wide avenue that passes in front of the chateau, notice the king's stables and carriage house constructed by Jules Hardouin-Mansart. Past the Louis XVIII gates three successive courtyards-the Cour du Ministre (Minister's Courtyard) and the Cour Royale (Royal Court), separated by a bronze statue of Louis XIV on horseback, and the internal Cour de Marbre (Marble Courtyard), lead to the visitors' entrance. The main entrance to the right of the Court Royale leads to a vestibule and ticket booth through which some four million visitors pass annually.

The famous Galerie des Glaces (Hall of Mirrors), flanked on either side by the Salon de la Guerre (Salon of War) and the Salon de la Paix (Salon of Peace), is perhaps the most memorable of all of Versailles' rooms. Extending along the west facade of the chateau it measures 73 m (240 ft) long, 10 m (33 ft) wide and 12 m (40 ft) high. Seventeen tall arched windows facing east are reflected in 17 sparkling mirrors on the opposite wall, each separated by red marble and bronze pilasters. Scrolls and cherubs, ornate candlesticks, crystal chandeliers, and a celebrated ceiling painting by Le Brun add to the pomp and splendour of this hall, once the scene of magnificent balls and the Sun King's venue for holding court with ambassadors from Persia, Siam, and other distant lands. The Treaty of Versailles was signed in this gallery on June 28, 1919, putting an official end to World War I.

Overnight in Paris. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 10 *Paris: The Louvre*

This morning we visit the Louvre. This colossus on the Seine, born in 1200 as a fortress and transformed over the centuries from Gothic mass to renaissance palace, served as the royal residence in the 16th and 17th centuries. It was then supplemented by suburban Versailles, becoming a museum in 1793 after the Revolution. It was Napoleon who later turned it into a glittering warehouse of artistic booty from the nations he conquered. Today its 200 galleries cover some 40 acres; to view all 297,000 items in the collection it would be necessary to walk some 13 km (8 miles).

In addition to the Mona Lisa, Venus de Milo, and the Winged Victory of Samothrace, the Louvre has many delights that are easily overlooked--Vermeer's Lace Maker and Holbein's Portrait of Erasmus, for instance; not to mention van der Weyden's Braque Triptych, Ingres's Turkish Bath, Durer's Self-Portrait, Cranach's naked and red-hatted Venus, and the

exquisite 4,000-year old Egyptian woodcarving known as the Handmaiden of the Dead. More of our favourites include Michelangelo's The Dying Slave and The Bound Slave, Goya's Marquesa de la Solana, Watteau's clown Gilles and his Embarkation for Cythera, Raphael's great portrait Baldassare Castignole, Veronese's Marriage at Cana, Titian's masterpiece Man with a Glove, both The Penitent Magdalen and The Card Sharps by Georges de la Tour, Rembrant's Bathsheba, and Frans Hal's Bohemian Girl.

The afternoon is free. You may want to do some shopping, visit other museums, or just stroll around this beautiful city.

Overnight in Paris. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 11 *Departure*

Departure from Paris.

If you would like to extend your time in Paris, please let us quote you rates for extra accommodation at the hotel used on tour.

BON VOYAGE! Meal plan: Breakfast.