



Having a Ball in Provence

Water doesn't always have to be a hazard for golfers. Our charismatic columnist barges in on France and finds exquisite food, irresistible wines, and first-rate golf, all along the river Rhône. / By A.G. Pollard Jr. / Illustration by Ward Schumaker

FRANCE IS HIGHLY UNDERRATED AS A DESTINATION for golfers, and I think I've discovered the reason: Most visitors gorge themselves silly on the rich food and, arriving home in a stupor, cannot tell their friends what wonderful golf can be found there.

Perhaps I exaggerate just a bit, but the first thing you should understand about France is that, although the golf is sublime, the country's top priority is dining well. One cannot get off the first tee without several cups of rich French-roast coffee, a nice omelet, and perhaps some freshly baked croissants, *n'est-ce pas?* Lunch at the turn is never a quick hot dog and a beer, but rather a leisurely affair built around a bottle or two of dry white wine, with maybe some poached fish, a terrine of fennel and eggplant, and, of course, a course of *fromage*. And dinner? Well, let's see. ... How about the foie gras with a chutney of figs, dates, and mango, followed by a breast of guinea fowl served with polenta and chanterelle mushrooms, a potato stuffed with melted muenster and dusted with cumin, and a crème brûlée verbena?

See what I mean? I gained another pound or two just writing all that down!

My most recent visit to France not only was delicious and fattening but also was an unusual voyage of discovery. A group of about 20 fellow travelers floated down the Rhône through Provence on an elegantly outfitted 127-foot barge called *Le Phenicien*, stopping

along the way to golf, sightsee, and shop. My trip was one of several annual barge-and-golf cruises offered by PerryGolf, an Atlanta-based golf packager.

We boarded our barge along a stretch of the Rhône flowing rapidly past the walled city of Avignon, about 50 miles north of Marseille. From 1305 to 1377, seven popes ruled the Catholic world from Avignon instead of Rome. The massive Palace of the Popes is still the largest Gothic palace in the world, but the city's complex warren of narrow medieval streets is far more interesting, filled with brasseries, bars, and art galleries.

As we slept off the jet lag in our tiny cabins, lulled by the burbling sounds of the Rhône rushing past the hull, a rainy front passed through, but the next morning dawned bright and sunny. And gusty. The local mistral wind is memorialized in a popular local

proverb: "*Avenie ventosa, sine vento venenosa, cum vento fastidiosa*" ("Windy Avignon, pest-ridden when there is no wind, wind-pestered when there is").

Three four-somes of us ►

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Facts on France

Highest-ranked French courses in Europe's Top 100

Morfontaine (1) and Les Bordes (10)

Oldest course in continental Europe

Pau Golf Club, near Biarritz, built in 1856

Golf course access

More than 600 courses for 300,000 golfers (Southern California has 400 courses for 2.3 million players)

First (and only) French player to win the British Open

Arnaud Massy (1907)

First (and only) French player to win the U.S. Women's Open / Catherine Lacoste (1967)

boarded a mini-bus after breakfast and rode about 40 minutes southeast to the town of Mallemort and the Pont Royal golf facility. Built around a pretty faux-Provençal hilltop town with a hotel and vacation residences, the golf course was designed by Seve Ballesteros of Spain, and, as usual for a Ballesteros-designed course, there were a lot of holes that made absolutely no sense. One of my playing partners hit a lovely drive right down the middle of the fairway and never saw the ball again. I told him he should have hit one into the nearest car park, since that was where Ballesteros always did his best work as a player.

Somehow, we all managed to avoid the S-for-Seve-shaped bunker on the last hole, enjoyed a lovely light lunch on the sun-washed patio, and climbed into the bus for the drive back up near Avignon and a visit to Châteauneuf du Pape. Winemaking in this region of France predates the Christian church, and when the popes were in residence, they had standing orders for the delicious vintages that spring out of the rocky *terroir*. We visited one of the vineyards for a tasting. My verdict: Good, better, and “please, sir, may I have some more?” After the long day, we were all glad to get back to the barge and another delicious dinner (while we cruised past Le Pont d’Avignon) of stuffed veggies, a piece of delicate cod lightly poached in wine, the *plat de fromage*, and pistachio ice cream.

On this cruise, the schedule alternated a day of golf with a day of sightseeing, so the next day we went to visit the Pont du Gard, the magnificent triple-decker Roman-built bridge designed to carry a 60-mile aqueduct from the mountains to the city of Nîmes. The Romans used slave labor and finished the thing in five years—much less time than was required for the Big Dig project in downtown Boston—and it’s still standing 2,000 years later. The Big Dig is already leaking.

A dinnertime cruise took us down the Rhône to Vallabregues, a marina tucked away on the broad bank of the river. The next morning, the golf bus shuttled us over to the Golf de Servanes near Les Baux de Provence, beneath the rocky escarpments of Les Alpines, or the “tiny

Alps.” The mistral was once again in full Force Five, which meant that many of us spent a lot of time hunting for lost balls in the olive groves that seemed to border many holes. But the course was a lot of fun to play, the views were spectacular, and the outdoor *biergarten* after the round most welcoming!

In the late afternoon, we chugged slowly downstream, through a 45-foot-high lock and into the pretty little city of Arles. Strolling through this still-bustling town, you can easily spot the Roman influences in the arena and the theater, as well as the medieval monuments that testify to the city’s wealthy past. Some of the group peeled off to find the house where Vincent van Gogh once lived and painted his *Starry Night Over the Rhône* and other works.

Our sightseeing continued the next day with a visit to a *manade*, or ranch, in the low-lying Camargue region. The ranch is one of the prime breeding grounds for the bulls used in the French version of bullfighting. In Spain the matador is the star and the bull always meets his end, but in France the bull is the main attraction. About a dozen foolhardy men dressed in white chase the bull around the ring trying to snatch some ribbons from his side, while the enraged 2,000-pound animal chases them back ... often following them as they fling themselves over a barricade and jump for the safety of the stands. But the bulls live on for the next show, and the nasty ones become famous.

We spent the afternoon puttering down the Rhône, into the Petit Rhône, and then into a canal that was barely wide enough for *Le Phenicien*. We tied up for the night outside Gallician, a tiny village with a church, a vineyard, and a café. After dinner (asparagus wrapped in smoked salmon with a purée of asparagus, cream, and horseradish; rack of lamb with roasted tomatoes and potatoes and a celery purée; and a special triple-chocolate cake), we smoked cigars on the foredeck, listened to the chorus of frogs, and watched the night sky full of van Gogh’s starry lights.

On the morning of our last full day in France, we tied up outside Aigues-Mortes in time for breakfast. With a name that translates literally to “Dead Water,” this



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rectangular walled city was built on flat and swampy land by Louis IX, better known as St. Louis, and from here he launched two Crusades to the Holy Land, in 1248 and 1270.

After lunch, we golfers headed for La Grande Motte, literally “The Big Ditch,” which actually makes the project in Boston sound better. The golf courses here anchor another hotel-cum-vacation center, and the main course features the work of the late Robert Trent Jones (or, more likely, Cabell Robinson, his main man in Europe for many years). Like that in Florida, the terrain here near the Mediterranean Sea is pancake-flat, but the course plays in and around several watery lagoons, and umbrella pines and eucalyptus border the fairways.

Our final night’s banquet onboard was *très jolie* ... so wonderful, in fact, that my notes on the evening’s menu and wine selections look like a knock-down Nassau scorecard with presses and double-presses, e.g. unintelligible. Suffice it to say that chef Thierry produced another miracle from his small galley kitchen, the local wine was brilliant, and everyone went home happy. Which is absolutely the right way to end a golf trip. ■

A.G. Pollard Jr., since returning from France, has taken to wearing a black beret and smoking Gauloises.

*** BOARDING PASS / Chart Your

Course / Get going, golfers: United is your link to France. The airline provides daily nonstop service to Paris’ Charles de Gaulle Airport (CDG) from Chicago’s O’Hare International (ORD) and Washington’s Dulles (IAD), so you’ll be teeing it up in no time. Bon voyage!

