



Arles

Tracing Vincent van Gogh's footsteps

'The Starry Night', 'Cafe Terrace at Night', 'Bedroom in Arles' – all invoke just one name whose artistic genius is unparalleled, Vincent van Gogh. Follow the artist's footsteps across the lavender fields of Provence, and get just as inspired as van Gogh himself in this walking tour in Arles.

words // Punita Malhotra

Away from the high-heeled sophistication of Paris and the intoxicating vineyard vistas of Burgundy, lies another France...rural, rustic, real. Where 'pinch-me-is-it-a-dream' villages overlook fragrance-filled lavender fields and plain tree-lined roads wind through carpets of vibrant, happy sunflowers. Where the lush countryside flaunts abundance of wheat, vegetables, fruits, herbs, olives and truffle under brilliantly blue skies. For centuries, the precious paradise of Provence has been an inspiration for amateur

and accomplished artists, even legends like Cézanne, Picasso and most importantly, Vincent van Gogh.

FOR THE LOVE OF ARLES

Ironically, art buffs and critics alike, now swear by the genius of the post-impressionist legend, who never sold a painting in his life. Curiosity-stricken hordes gawk endlessly over some of his most admired canvases housed in the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam, the MoMA and the Met in New York. But, the more serious art aficionados, on the other hand,

can aspire for richer rewards. They can venture beyond the hushed, hallowed galleries into the sunny, cheerful pastures of Provence, where van Gogh once found his calling. To visualise the straw hat-clad Dutch painter, setting up his easel in the midst of Provençal landscape, furiously creating one bright and bold canvas after another, narrating his personal pain through the story of the changing seasons in his inimitable style, is a surreal experience. All his favourite subjects...blossoming flowers, sowing-reaping peasants and windswept fields...have



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a permanent home here. The ultimate art fantasy comes to life in the ancient Roman town of Arles, where van Gogh lived and crafted over 300 passion-filled pieces within just 18 months. Ten steel-and-concrete easels mark the locations, coinciding with some of his most famous paintings, for those who prefer to wander around freely in a self-guided tour. It's a wonderful walk in the footsteps of van Gogh, breathing the same French countryside air he did.

CANVAS COUNTDOWN

Quintessentially Roman elements are scattered everywhere. The theatre, baths, aqueducts, sports arenas are all reminders of the lovingly preserved heritage of a town which was once a vital

Western Roman Empire port and link to the Mediterranean. From the ancient Roman ruins of Alyscamps Necropolis, where van Gogh painted four scenes in 1888, and the bright green grass of its urban park Jardin d'Été, to Rue Voltaire's lively awning-draped stone buildings, and the bridges of Trinquetaille and Langlois, every bit of Arles is an open art gallery. But some pitstops are almost obligatory, like the grand three-tiered Roman amphitheatre.

Standing inside the Arles Colosseum, one marvels at the architectural prowess of the Romans, who built it 2000 years before van Gogh's time. Its beauty with its wild emotions has been

captured flawlessly in 'The Arena at Arles', thanks to the unique jittery technique that he perfected with the influence of his close friend and contemporary, Paul Gauguin.

The most-wanted in all of Arles is the easel with a painting of 'The Yellow House', planted where van Gogh's home once stood. The sunflower-yellow painted, sun-drenched Provençal building has long gone, but its eternal spirit lives on. After all, this was where one of the world's most famous artists challenged his limits with masterpieces like 'Café Terrace at Night', 'Sunflowers' and 'The Sower'.

The quiet riverside quay is a far cry from its buzzing ancient version,

ESSENTIALS

COUNTRY
France

LANGUAGE
French

CURRENCY
Euro

TEMPERATURE
30°C (max), 15°C (min)

Did you **KNOW?**



THE LETTERS OF VINCENT VAN GOGH

Looking for a deeper insight into the artist's private life? A collection of letters exchanged between Van Gogh and his brother Theo, sister Wil, and fellow artists Paul Gauguin, Anthon van Rappard and Emile Bernard, is the answer to it. *The Letters of Vincent van Gogh* is a collection of 903 surviving letters, out of which 820 were written by van Gogh and 83 were received. Published by Theo's widow Johanna van Gogh-Bonger, these letters are both a study of the artist's personal life and works of literature.



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when the Rhone was the centre of commerce for the thriving Roman empire. But it still looks like how van Gogh would have seen it, calm and soothing. It is fascinating to analyse how he exaggerated the scene in his depiction, 'Starry Night Over the Rhone'. The explosion of Prussian, ultramarine and cobalt blues, highlighted with deep orange-yellows of the gas lights reflecting in the water, seems more than justified.

His other memorable creation, 'Café Terrace at Night' morphs into reality at the iconic Le Café van Gogh. Though its not the original yellow cafe from his painting, the resemblance is remarkably close. Yellow in colour, illuminated from within, it stands in sharp contrast to the

dark night as it did then.

And finally, one can visit the location of the 'Courtyard of the Hospital at Arles', where he was treated for a partially severed ear, which he himself cut off after a tense episode with his friend Gauguin. The copy of his painting displayed in the courtyard captures the scene exactly, even today... flower bunches, shady trees, pillared corridor et al.

TOWARDS FULL CLOSURE

Satiety comes with closure at the nearby town of Saint-Rémy, where van Gogh lived during his last traumatic year at the psychiatric institution of Saint Paul of Mausole Monastery. But apparently, even in that state, the ambience was no less

inspiring, because he left behind a legacy of 146 oil paintings and 150 drawings here, including notables like 'Wheat Fields', 'Bedroom' and his star creation, 'Starry Night'. Copies of his art pieces are displayed on easels everywhere...in his austere bedroom, in the open fields, near the gnarled olive trees, close to the famous blue irises and flowering trees, and beside the tall cypresses. The distinctive, swirling brushwork and dense colours are, of course, a recurring theme. One leaves the asylum with vivid imagery... an unacknowledged genius in his mid-thirties desperately seeking respite and finding fleeting peace in the uplifting Provençal light. ✨