

ROMANCING THE RHÔNE

The tide has turned on river cruising with more itineraries inviting guests to choose their own adventure. Jocelyn Pride does just that as she sets sail on a new Active & Discovery cruise from Provence to Beaujolais.

“Voilà!” says winemaker Raphael Pommier as the last sliver of light disappears, plunging us into darkness so dense I can’t see the glass in my hand. “Now there are no distractions to our brain, we’re ready to begin. Welcome to our prehistoric bar.”

Having donned miners’ suits and helmets (complete with headlamps), we rambled through underground chambers surrounded by stalactites hanging like petrified icicles to reach a low limestone wall, on which we now perch. The motionless air is thick with anticipation.

“Grenache grapes are the kings of the Rhône Valley,” Raphael says, his velvety voice as hypnotic as the fruits of his labour. “Each wine starts with grenache, but they’ll taste entirely different.”

Not only is Raphael the first French winemaker to guide wine tastings in pitch darkness 80 metres underground, he also ages his wine here, in the grotto of Saint Marcel d’Ardèche. “The cave helps the wine age without losing the freshness of the fruit,” he explains. It also heightens the sensory experience of drinking wine.

Swilling grenache in a cave is just one of 30-plus immersive excursions offered on Avalon Waterways’ new eight-day Active & Discovery on the Rhône itinerary, taking us from Arles to Lyon in France aboard the elegant 64-suite *Poetry II*.

The Avalon buzz

Moving with the current, Avalon has revolutionised experiential river cruising. “We’ve responded to what our guests want,” says Pam Hoffee, the company’s managing director. “A few years ago, we put a couple of cycling tours on our European itineraries and noticed they were always the first to fill. We then asked, ‘What if?’”

The response lies in the buzz among my globetrotting shipmates, ranging in age from 30 to 90. During happy hour(s), excited chatter fills the bar. “How was the oyster tasting?”, “What’s it like riding an electric bike?”, “What did you cook?”, “How hard was the hike?”.

Each day unfolds with unexpected highlights. One morning I cycle across Pont du Gard, a 49-metre-high, 275-metre-long Roman aqueduct and engineering masterpiece, then in the afternoon I swap pedals for paddles to kayak through its massive arches, beneath a sapphire sky dotted with puffy white clouds.

Another day, emotions run riot at Carrières de Lumières, a limestone quarry transformed into an enormous gallery where Van Gogh’s masterpieces are projected onto walls, pillars, the floor, all accompanied by a soul-stirring soundtrack. And then there are the strolls through story-book medieval villages like Les Baux-de-Provence, Tournon-sur-Rhône and Oingt, and watching the ship negotiate Bollène-écluse lock, one of Europe’s deepest.

Between excursions there’s time to enjoy the ambience of the *Poetry II*.

01 Avalon Poetry II cruising into Lyon 02 Soaking up the French scenery 03 Exploring Lyon © Jocelyn Pride 04 Floor-to-ceiling windows frame the countryside 05 Small villages line the banks of the river © Jocelyn Pride



Culinary inspiration

The relaxed luxury feel extends to the lounges and dining room. From the Sky Deck (perfect for a nightcap while star gazing), to the cosy Club Lounge and Panorama Lounge, the vibe is upbeat and friendly. For daytime meals, the choice is quick and light in the lounge, or linger longer in the main dining room where dinners are also served.

In fine cruise style, the food is a highlight. “We source raw ingredients from local suppliers as much as possible,” says head chef Michal Zamborsky. “Apart from bread, we prepare everything from scratch.” The ‘we’ is a team of 10 that turns out meal after meal of culinary excellence.

With an emphasis on French cuisine, the four- to five-course dinners are specifically matched with regional wines. Local delicacies like *escargot* (snails), mussels and lamb feature together with creative soups and hard-to-resist desserts. The menu also includes an Avalon Fresh choice for each course: guilt-free dining to complement the active theme.

Entertainment is as varied as the menu. Guest performers bring life to the dance floor, playing everything from jazz to disco, classical music to flamenco. In Viviers, we head ashore for entertainment of a different kind: a ‘ghost’ tour that turns out to be a rollicking French farce that has us in peals of laughter.

From the intimacy of small villages, our final port is a lively metropolis. A UNESCO-listed city, Lyon’s grand boulevards are lined with ancient buildings, quite the juxtaposition to the city’s other, new-age architecture. After an urban hike through the *traboules* (a labyrinth of secret passages behind hidden doorways in Lyon’s oldest area), I opt for one last adventure in the surrounding Beaujolais region – sipping wine with a countess in her fairytale castle. *C’est magnifique!* ♦

Travel file

Cruise

Avalon Waterways’ eight-day Active & Discovery on the Rhône cruise runs in both directions between Port-Saint-Louis-du-Rhône (Arles) and Lyon, from May to October. avalonwaterways.com.au



And what a beauty she is. My Panorama Suite is ingenious in design. With the flick of the wrist, a wall of windows slides open, in so doing transforming 18.5 square metres into an indoor/outdoor balcony. It’s a feature that the vast majority of cabins enjoy.

Avalon’s signature angled wall also means my comfy bed (that even has a ‘comfort’ menu), faces out, so I can breathe in the tapestry of rural France, without getting up.

While the big picture is a blockbuster, it’s the small details that add to the sumptuousness – under-bed space for luggage, wardrobe with solid wooden coat hangers, oversized security box, sewing kit, L’Occitane amenities, thick fluffy towels, several USB ports, mini bar that’s more like a maxi, flatscreen TV loaded with current movies. However, to me the greatest luxury is the silence. Once cocooned inside my suite, I sometimes wonder if we’ve moored and everyone’s gone ashore.