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THEN THERE WAS VIENNE

AN ENGLISHWOMAN EXPLORES

Nothing to do with Austria ...
but a lot about a little-known destination
in France ... shhh!

C.S. LAWRENCE

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a little-known destination in France ... shhh!*

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Preface

I moved into a beautiful old building, the former house of the cathedral priests, in the centre of Vienne on 1st December 2018. One week later, I decided that I would write a book about the town. And I did.

I'd lived all over the world, clocking up over 30 years between South America, Asia and Europe, yet had never really been inspired to write in this way. I'd also lived in different parts of France and definitely enjoyed each one in its own right but still, no urge to put pen to paper.

Then there was Vienne! Every which way I looked beckoned with a story to tell. I found myself increasingly overwhelmed with curiosity, wanting to research this, that and the other, interview people, read, visit, listen, watch and imagine. Soon I found article after article bubbling up as one path of exploration led to another. I could have gone on but at some point you have to call it a day.

So here it is. You can read the chapters, or articles, in any order, dipping in to them at will, although it would make sense to read the Introduction first. Some talk about the history of Vienne, others about parts of it I particularly love. Many reflect the delights and colours of the town's plentiful cultural events, while more are dedicated to a small sample of the many admirable but invisible figures who live or work there. Two or three articles stretch out to nearby places worth visiting, such as the Postman's Palace and the Mariners' Museum. Finally I have allowed myself

*To my father and Uncle Iggy,
who modestly published their own
little books many years ago.*

to throw in a few personal experiences to depict daily life and its dramas against the backdrop of Vienne.

You might find certain places or idiosyncrasies cropping up in different articles as the town was one big stage forming the backdrop for each character and story. I hope that together the chapters weave a tapestry, which will really give you a feel for Vienne, make you want to explore it and get as much joy as I did out of all the historical, cultural and human wealth of this largely unknown and underrated small town.

Wherever you've already been, remember: Then there is Vienne!

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1. Introduction

A wander down the annals

*2500 years of history, markets, wine and music.
To be avoided at all costs!*

Dear Reader,

I am going to tell you about the place where I live, but first you must promise me one thing: that you will never come. I couldn’t bear to see hordes of tourists rock up, pastel shorts, sensible sandals and all. We already have a fair few – you can’t miss them, some piling off the cruisers that stop here most months of the year or others sitting aboard Le City Tram, both groups taking a whistlestop tour of some of the 40 (yes 40!) listed monuments. How dare they! You see, this place is my little secret. Even though it’s surprisingly close to France’s third largest urban conglomeration, it’s still a peaceful backwater and neither I nor the locals would like that to change.

No, I won’t tell you the name. I’ll put that off as long as I can, at least until you’ve booked your holiday elsewhere. Quelle bonhomie.

Oh dear, now I feel mean. Let’s strike a deal. You can come. But just you. No family, friends or, even worse, a blind date. Keep a low profile and behave with the utmost decorum – no suncream in public, no selfies and, God forbid, no socks with sandals.

So now the fun begins. I shall take you on a meandering journey two thousand years down the annals of history as we cast ourselves back into Roman times. Believe it or not, this town was practically the same size then as it is now, with roughly the same population, in the region of 30,000. That's big for the Romans and huge for the Gauls, who had made it their capital a few hundred years before. A splurge of monumental construction reflected its importance as the town rose to the status of a Roman colony. I would bet that there is no other place in France where there is so much Roman construction either intact or with visible remains, or sadly gone but with pointers to its past glory. Not only is there a fully intact temple and a massive outdoor theatre, there are also the remains of an Odeon, assembly hall, forum, and seven kilometres of imposing stone ramparts. As if that wasn't enough, there was once a five-hectare two-storey warehouse complex, along with a hippodrome accommodating 15,000 spectators. Across the river, the vestiges have been found of dozens of sumptuous sprawling villas decorated with gorgeous mosaics. The grounds of the Gallo-Roman Museum contain some of these mansions, as well as the ruins of a whole neighbourhood revealing everyday Roman life. You will be gobsmacked but, hush, don't tell a soul.

Onward we wander, zigzagging up through the ragged mists of time.

The Middle Ages saw the city shrivel to a miserable scrap of its former opulence but the period left its mark on the street layout. Numerous narrow alleys with central gutters bear names that reflect the inhabitants and practices of medieval life: rue de la Juiverie, des Clercs, de l'Archevêché, des Orfèvres, to mention but a few. Great religious edifices were built, including the grand Gothic cathedral, churches, chapels, monasteries and cloisters, many of which are still standing. It was in this cathedral that the

Order of the Knights Templar was officially dissolved in 1312 by the Council of Vienne.

Now is not the time for stories of the flourishing 18th and 19th century industrial boom in an outlying suburb of the town. Suffice it to say that, without this, the French army may well have been reduced to fighting World War I in their underwear. We'll come back to that later.

It was in the 1800s that most of the main street was built and there lies my special joy. So perfect in its provincial simplicity with its leafy central walkway that I always find myself stopping at some point and just drinking it in. Yet there's nothing twee. It's just a functional shopping street where everyone goes about their daily business. Bread is bought, hair is cut and pizzas are eaten.

At the top of this lovely wide sweep, a small square holds a tiny market several mornings a week. This is home to a few fruit and veg stands, a fish van, the ubiquitous cheese seller, and two or three year-round flower stalls. The mammoth Saturday market is the one that has put the town on the map but I prefer the low-key charm of the little weekday cluster.

The western boundary of the town is carved out by the majestic river, with its pedestrian suspension bridge and the tow paths now peopled by walkers, joggers and cyclists. Long flat tourist boats glide up and down alongside humdrum cargo barges. To the east, five verdant hills provide rounded contours, dotted with the deep greens of cedar and cypress, pale rocky escarpments and a few vineyards, making a picture-perfect backdrop. Some of the best wines in France (the locals would say the world) are produced in this part of the country. The northernmost of these hills is crowned by the classic silhouette of a ruined 13th century chateau. One story goes that the hills so reminded the Romans

of their own capital that they just had to settle here. More likely it was the vino.

Yet our Latin-speaking chums, for all their legacy, didn't introduce jazz to this place. That was to happen in 1981, when the first event was held in early July. And what a hit the annual festival has become. The top bills are held in the Roman theatre, where over 7,000 fans pack the stone terraces. At the same time, the rest of the town hosts a myriad of gigs in its parks and squares, about 250 concerts in all, crammed into 16 days. This is the largest cultural event in the region, attracting some 230,000 visitors.

By now I must have given the name away, assuming of course that you haven't cheated and looked at the cover. Alright, alright, it's Vienne, Vienne - Isère. There's another one in the west, but non, non, non, it's not that. It's Vienne - Isère, Vienne 38. Ville d'art et d'histoire, hidden jewel of the Rhône Valley, galerie marchande à ciel ouvert [open-air shopping arcade], commuter outpost of Lyon, little Rome, music magnet, wine buffs' delight, market browsers' paradise, bizarrely abundant in seamstresses and notaries, boasting an unpronounceable type of sundial, and home to a tragicomedy of a railway station.

So, come if you wish, be my guest and join me on a tour of the delights of Vienne. I promise you will not be disappointed.

2. *Colonia Julia Viennensium*

*A potted tour of Roman Vienne,
starting with a sunken road*

The Roman road in the Jardin de Ville

Let's start this tour in the Jardin de Ville. It was in this lush haven of peace that, lost in my reverie on an evening walk amid towering lime and chestnut trees, beyond a cloud of white blossom, I came across a Roman road and stood mesmerized.

About 30 metres long, sunken and partly occluded by rockery flowers, it was almost invisible, yet glorious. I feasted my eyes on the hopelessly uneven paving stones, some gouged by deep wheel traces, and the raised pavement bordering one side. There is even a milestone from Emperor Constantine's rule dated 308-309, although, to be precise, this was found nearby and added to the park in the 1890s. I stepped lightly down onto the stones in the stillness of the twilight and was transported back.

Let's start here. If you don't feel too silly, lie down and feel the stones. Close your eyes and hear the rhythmic marching of soldiers, the rolling rattle of chariots, merchants touting their wares, children shrieking and mothers admonishing. This would have been a busy road as it led to the vast warehouse complex by the Rhône. Covering five hectares, the depot was reputedly as big as the storerooms of Rome's main port at Ostia. Imagine

those exciting, bustling years in the first and second centuries AD when Vienne was in its heyday.

In 121 BC, Vienne became part of Provence or 'Provincia', the new Roman territory beyond the Alps. It had been a major settlement for the Allobroges Gauls a good 400 years before that, becoming the capital of their territory.

Julius Caesar came here in 52 BC to collect cavalry reinforcements for his Gallic Wars. To reward the town for supporting the Caesar when other Gauls wanted his guts for garters, he renamed it Colonia Julia Viennensium, quite a mouthful. Still, nobody minded as in doing so he raised the town to the status of a colony. Every resident was thus bestowed with the rights of free citizens of the Roman Empire. Vienne may also have been exempted from paying certain taxes to Rome, thereby allowing the great monuments characteristic of self-respecting Roman cities to be built. It was a prosperous town, sitting at the crossroads of major north-south and east-west routes, from the Mediterranean up to the North Sea, and from the Alps to the Atlantic.

Alright, you can get up now. We're off to the theatre.

The Roman Theatre

The largest standing Roman structure is the *Théâtre Antique* on the slopes of Mont Pipet. The reconstructed semi-circle of terraces built into the hillside is a restoration of the original, thought to have held up to 11,000 spectators. This abandoned site became a quarry when the Romans had gone. Stones were taken and houses were even built here in medieval times. Tons of earth had to be removed when the theatre was rebuilt in the 1930s.

While we can get a fairly accurate idea of where the audience sat, it's hard to imagine the magnificence of the former stage, which was believed to have been backed by a wall 32 m high and

120 m long, most likely decorated with several floors of columns, loggias, doors and statue-filled niches. Just stop and take in those dimensions – it was huge! Spectators gained access to the theatre tiers through underground passages or *vomitoires* (still used today), which literally spewed them out onto the rows of stone seating.

The performances were day-long affairs usually involving musical comedies and dances put on by troupes often sponsored by political bigwigs. Notables had the best seats, carved from rose marble and softened by cushions. These VIP areas were shielded from the intense heat of the day by awnings manoeuvred with a web of ropes and pulleys to ensure shade as the sun moved across the sky. No such treatment at today's festivals, not even for Monsieur le Maire. The remaining tiers were allotted to different classes of society, with slaves and women unsurprisingly getting the raw deal of the highest, most distant rows. Maybe not such a bad deal as it happens – those high tiers get excellent acoustics and a view stretching far beyond Vienne.

The summit of Mont Pipet, right above the theatre and dominating the whole city, was a sacred site crowned by a temple dedicated to Castor and Pollux, the twin sons of Zeus, who were remembered as horsemen, athletes and the guardians of sailors in peril.

Le Temple

Slap bang in the town centre stands the astonishing Temple d'Auguste et Livie, complete, intact, and incongruously stuck in the middle of a smallish 19th century square that has seen better days. Vienne is the only town in France apart from Nimes to boast an intact Roman temple. Building probably started in the reign of Emperor Augustus, roughly 20-10 BC, and then had a second spurt in about 40 AD, conjectured to be repair work after an earthquake. Only priests could enter the inner area, which

held the emperor's statue as a symbol of Roman dominance. I chuckle when reading that 'Livie', the name of Augustus' wife, was inscribed at a later date, imagining the right royal row leading to the addition. "If you don't get my name added to that temple in Vienne, I'm out of here," Livie the Livid. "Alright, dear, but no statue."

There are thought to have been some 12 Roman temples in Vienne and most have left no trace. We can thank our medieval forebears for the survival of this central temple. Following the departure of the Romans and the rise of Christianity, it was turned into a church; walls were built between the columns and eventually even windows were put in. Called Notre Dame de la Vie, the church lasted as such until the French Revolution, when it became a Temple of Reason. It was this continued use that prevented the columns from collapsing and the stones from being pilfered.

Le Jardin de Cybèle

A few blocks away, the wedge-shaped Jardin de Cybèle is hidden behind an uninspiring eight-storey 1960s apartment block - don't ask me how that got there - and hemmed in at the south by the high walls of old residential buildings. The garden is on a steep slope so hardly a space for parking your behind or setting out your picnic. A sorry flight of concrete steps splits the park in the middle. Apart from some grand Paulownia trees, ablaze with pale blossom in the spring, there's not much 'garden' about it.

What makes it unique, though, are the Roman stones and walls covering nearly every flat inch in sight. At the northern end stand two gargantuan Roman arches, perpendicular to each other, one bearing the face of a female formerly believed to be Cybèle, the Mother of the Gods, or the goddess of nature. This was part of the colonnaded entrance to the grand forum, which stretched

away to the north. In front of the arches a whole complex of flagstones, waterways, alleys and walls, some standing several metres high, stretch across the park. Much of this area used to be an assembly room where 800 local figures could discuss issues of the day. The rest was a residential neighbourhood with shops and, as now, steps connecting the lower and higher surrounding streets. Maybe close your eyes again and imagine all those togas swishing to and fro.

L'Odéon

Once with an audience capacity of 3,000, Vienne's Odeon is now barely visible in the long grass on the rise next to the Roman theatre. Looking leftwards from the Mont Pipet belvedere, you can just make out a semi-circular shape dotted by stones and sections of raised earth. Vienne is one of very few Gallo-Roman cities, with Lyon and possibly Valence, to have had an Odeon, a smaller theatre reserved for song, reading and poetry. The first-century poet Martial, famed for his epigrams poking fun at Roman life, is recorded as saying he was honoured to hear that his work had been recited at Vienne's Odeon. Unfortunately there is no public access into the grounds, but if you stand by the gate on a balmy night, you might just catch snatches of verse and laughter drifting on the warm breeze.

La Pyramide

A few blocks south of today's railway station, the Pyramid is all that remains of the enormous hippodrome, the venue of chariot races - usually of *quadrigas*, chariots pulled by four horses. A whopping 460 m long, the racetrack had a long central barrier, or spina, in which stood the Pyramid flanked by statues of sporting heroes. Four teams (white, blue, green and red) would compete by doing seven circuits anti-clockwise, goaded on by 15,000 spec-

tators amid frenetic betting. Why seven? Why anti-clockwise? I wonder.



La Pyramide.

Le Reste

We have gone full circle and are back in the Jardin de Ville with its Roman road. Just beyond, on the banks of the Rhône, stood the extensive warehouses thought to have possibly stored

the *'annone'* or the tax of cereals imposed on Roman Gaul. These two-floor storerooms stretched south, occupying five hectares - that's about 7 football fields - suggesting that they held more than just local produce. Other goods, including textiles, leather hide, metalware and later wine, may also have been exported. Fish sauce, oil and wine were perhaps brought from Spanish or other Mediterranean ports. Imagine the clatter of all the terracotta urns and amphoras, not to mention the vast quantities of stone and marble for constructing mansions, temples and public buildings, being unloaded from the boats and then rolled or shouldered up the quayside into the long alleys of the complex. All gone now, silent beneath a noisy dual carriageway.

Ramparts were built around the city, up and down the five hills surrounding the town, reaching 2.5 m thick or 8 m high at times. These may have been the largest ramparts in Roman Gaul. Extending nearly 7 km, daubed in whitewash and interspersed with 58 watchtowers, they were actually built as a status symbol rather than a real line of defence. You can see a few sections of these don't-mess-with-us walls on the lower part of Cours Bril-lier diagonally opposite the Tourist Office, roughly where they would have been interrupted by the Porte d'Avignon. How many slaves must have toiled to produce this never-used fortification?

Judging by stone foundations discovered in the river, at least two bridges seem to have crossed the Rhône to the flat plain of what is now Sainte-Colombe and Saint-Romain-en-Gal, where the remnants of over 65 spacious villas belonging to affluent Gauls have been found. These homes of rich, aristocratic families were adorned with intricate mosaics, colonnaded gardens, marble statues, burbling fountains and shady trellises. And of course, with grapes growing all around, there were probably no end of Bacchanalian feasts.

Wander around Vienne and you will no doubt bump into some Roman remains, as I did in the Jardin de Ville. Yet local life carries

on regardless. Children clamber on the stones in the Jardin de Cybèle, friends chat over a drink beside the temple without batting an eyelid, and residents quietly disappear into flats built over the thick ramparts. As for the 25 m Pyramid marking the centre of the hippodrome, it's just a mini-roundabout in a quiet backstreet.

Sometimes feel we should have a giant toga party. Bags be a beautiful Egyptian slave¹.

3. *The runaway train*

aka 'Le City Tram'

A total misnomer. This is not a city and that is not a tram. Which kind of sets the tone for what lies ahead. Ostensibly it is the sightseeing bus, the equivalent of *Le Petit Train* of many other French towns. Pale blue and white, with wide sweeps of window back, front, sides and even in the roof, it perches on its tiny wheels outside the Tourist Office like an oversized toy waiting for miniature wooden passengers to hop on. It takes you round the main sights, including the nearest hilltop, where everyone piles out to see the view, and then trundles back down before snaking around the ins and outs of the town centre. It all sounds perfect, until you get in.

You soon realize that shock absorbers are not the forte of this mechanical worm and that the driver has a penchant for sharp braking. The tour planners have foreseen all this as, to distract passengers, soothing music is piped out between all audio explanations, which are impeccably imparted via headphones in French, English or German. Thus you clatter round the tall white obelisk of the Pyramid, bounce under the plane trees lining the Rhône riverfront, bump your way past the sturdy Roman ramparts, weave up and down the hill, manoeuvre tight bends and slide across seats, all the while either straining to hear the commentary or humming along to your favourite oldie.

1 – A nod to Steven Saylor and his Roma Sub-Rosa series.