

A triathlon for the indolent

By **Stephen Nash** | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT SEPTEMBER 13, 2014



LINDA NELSON NASH FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Along a hiking path above the Italian village of Vols, in the Dolomites.

I'm the fortunate friend of some inspiring athletes. An attorney who swam the channel from Alcatraz to San Francisco. An oncologist who attracts a crowd at the gym when she lifts weights. The triathlete who only eased up when he hit his seventh decade.

I needed to be in this conversation — but on my own slacker terms — so I came up with three weeks of travel that include well-hedged exertions. First, bicycling among the castle ruins and vineyards of Provence. Then a week in the same vicinity on a cruise down the Rhone River. Finally, a quick transit out of the gathering heat of late spring, and on to a week of hiking in the cooler, colossal Dolomites, northern Italy's Alps.

Another way to avoid work was to outsource the planning. The biking and hiking weeks were self-guided, inn-to-inn package tours, and the river cruise had optional day trips. Each of these three components also works as a stand-alone vacation, especially in fall or late spring.

My wife Linda and I took it fairly easy. Except, of course, for the need to weave a few thousand years of plague and exaltation, settlement, revolution and migration, and the art and aggression of Roman generals, French popes, Cathars, Cistercians, Saracens, Lutherans, Lombards, and Ligurians into a sort of grand unification tapestry that makes sense of the human condition. Ooooh, that was hard, but it is, after all, the hidden agenda for curious travel.

The biking week began with loop trips around the small town of Saint-Rémy, over the fertile landscape that makes much of Provence a big produce market for the rest of France. That soil is also soaked in the blood of centuries of warfare from the Napoleonic back to the neolithic. They're becalmed for now, the crooked, cobbled lanes of Bonnieux, Ventoux, Beaucaire, Maillane, Mazan — lyrical names for lovely stone villages, chateaux, and fortified ruins along our cycling route maps.

With few exceptions, the food and the local wines we came across in these places were brilliant, so good we had to stop for more than one lunch some days, just to sample more diligently.

After we granny-gear our way up a long climb to the ancient village of Venasque, for example, the view from our lofty terrace table at the Hotel Les Remparts' restaurant was rapturous. We gazed into a deep wild gorge, some ruins half hidden in the forests on the far side. The near view: red mullet and sea bream filet with red cabbage sauce, paper-wrapped chicken with basil sauce, Provençal deer stew, quail preserve with anchovy sauce. We stayed hours.



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A market stall along a bike route in the river town of L'Isle-sur-la-Sorgue.

This was the region where, in 100 B.C., the Roman general Marius lay in wait for two years for their arrival, then annihilated the first vast wave of Teutonic and Celtic invaders. His victory over the northern barbarians didn't matter much in the longer run. As you can learn at an archeological site of a Roman settlement called Glanum, just on the outskirts of St. Remy, the Romans were ultimately overrun.

Among the compelling ruins here is a mostly intact triumphal arch from around 27 B.C., the oldest in France, and according to some architectural historians, the most beautiful. Some of its stone carvings depict conquered

Gauls: the cooperative are favored with Roman bounty. The recalcitrants are chained to a pile of captured weapons and, one assumes, in deep trouble.

Just across the road from Glanum is the St. Paul asylum. It is a strand in a different story, a way station on the Vincent Van Gogh pilgrimage route through Provence. This was where the anguished artist sought treatment after the ear incident in 1888. Some of his most revered work, including “Starry Night,” was created here.

Nearby Arles, where Van Gogh and Paul Gauguin lived for a short time, is now the home of the new Van Gogh Institute, with a collection of the artist’s high-energy canvases. Arles was at the southern end of our week’s boat trip down the Rhone.

It traced a southerly course through a series of locks and dams that have tamed this roiling river, one of the longest in Europe. We exulted in our first sighting of swans; hundreds more — even a black one — glided past on subsequent days along with a leisurely pageant of historic forests, bridges, villes, and vines. Bring binoculars.

All this was interspersed with guided tours and on-your-own interludes. As we walked Lyon, France’s second-largest metro area, the feet grew weary, but the fascinations drew us on: for instance, a bombastic fountain in a civic plaza from the post-Napoleon era, featuring three rabid horses that look poised to trample tourists and pigeons alike.

The massive Basilica of Notre-Dame de Fourvière, built in the late 19th century, nearly dominates the western skyline from a high ridge. A critic of the day said that it all cost too much and anyway, the design with its four tall towers looked like an inverted elephant (an image that suited so well I could not banish it, whenever I looked in that direction).

The boat docked for an evening walk in tiny, medieval Viviers, up to a crumbling watchtower above the town, flanked by arches that framed the stars. Citizen street-sitters greeted us as we filed past. They looked as if they hadn’t moved from the spot since Cezanne was a bébé.



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The ruins of a Roman aqueduct, along a bike-friendly country road in Provence.

We spent a final day tramping through the historic market plazas and over the namesake nursery-rhyme bridge of Avignon, battered to a fragment over the centuries by the mighty Rhone. That night, our last of the cruise, we ascended in a grand arc over the city on a nearly deserted Ferris wheel. Through its spokes, decked in green and brilliant silver-blue lights, was the river view. On the other side, the brooding, shadowed Papal Palace also rose, then sank.

For 67 years in the 1300s, through the tenures of seven popes, the Church's headquarters were here, away from the hazards of Rome. The scale of the Palace reflects its preoccupation with power and security. You could easily spend a full day among its great halls, absorbing an intricate and violent era.

Maybe there were clues to be gathered from this vantage as to, you know, the meaning of it all? What would Pope Clement VI, plotting and parrying

and building the section of the beautiful pont that yet remains, have made of the sight of a gaudy, eerie Ferris wheel on the horizon of his high window? Famously lavish, a party animal on a Holy Roman imperial scale, Clement might well have loved it.

We took a short flight from Marseille to Venice the next morning and drove along narrowing Alpine valleys and up to the hamlet of Völs in the Dolomites, the start of a week of inn-to-inn hiking.

This is northern Italy, but was part of Austria before World War I, and road signs are still bilingual. At a hütte (or utia) along a hiking trail, the history plays out at times in odd transcultural menu items. An order of minestrone soup, for example, arrived at our picnic table floating two fat tubes of wurst. Pickled cabbage cohabited with tagliatelli.

The Dolomites are all high drama. Trails here differ from, say, those in US national parks. You can feel the burn with rapid elevation gains to the highest reaches, or veer to well-graded carriage trails at mid-elevations, all connected by a convenient web of ski lifts that run all summer. On rises along all but the most rugged trails, wooden benches discreetly appear, each with a commanding view of the crags.

Every hour or so you encounter one of those weathered-wood utia, with outdoor terraces and kids' playgrounds, 40-item menus of pastas and regional cheeses, prosecco and hugo, a light elderberry cocktail, and long wine lists. This was all pretty startling but hewing to our theme — long live indolence! — we just tried to adapt.

By the time this final week wound down, we figured out that we might also have considered other ways to visit (see the sidebar).

As for the philosophy of life, the pattern of meaning that I evolved during these distracting three weeks, and that you are avid to hear more about: All I can say is that somewhere between the Ferris wheel and a platter of pasta alla boscaiola on the trail, gazing out over the crags looming above Cortina, I decided that the whole subject calls for additional research. Which I intend to arrange soon.

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