

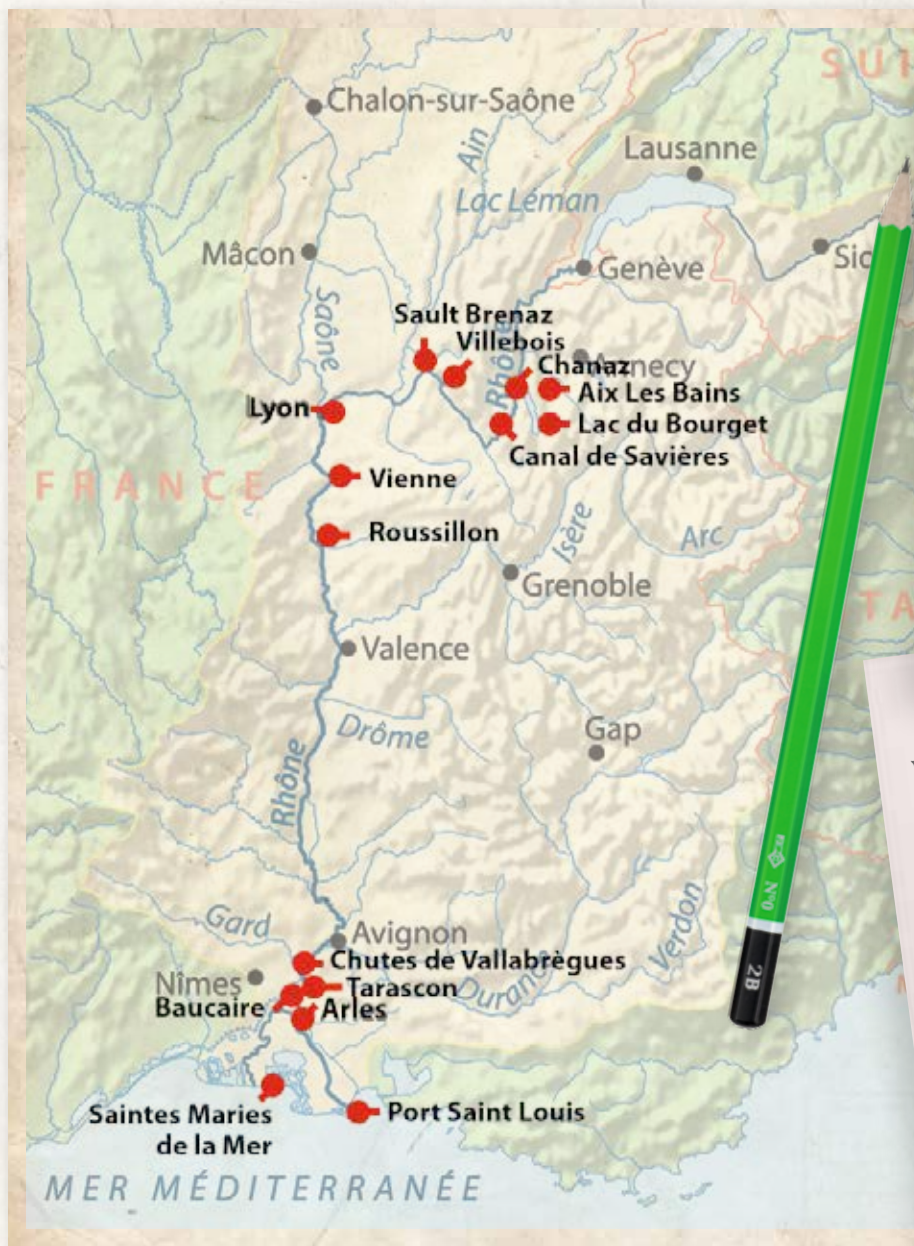


INITIATIVES POUR L'AVENIR
DES GRANDS FLEUVES
INITIATIVES FOR THE FUTURE
OF GREAT RIVERS



OVER THE RHONE

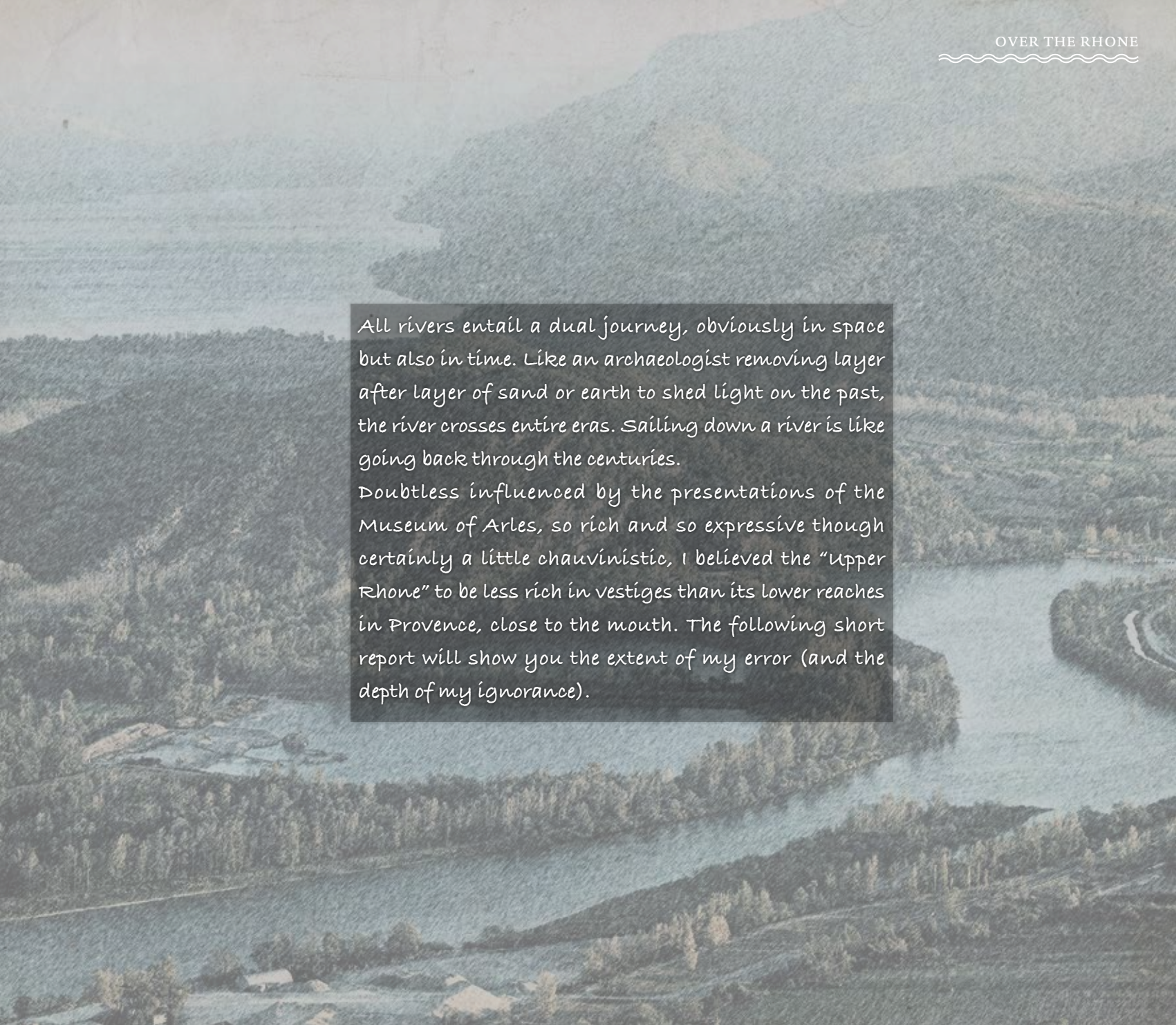
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ROUTE PLAN

Lake Bourget
Aix Les Bains
Savières canal
Chanaz
Villebois
Sault Brenaz
Lyon

Vienne
Roussillon
Vallabregues falls
Beaucaire
Tarascon
Arles
The Saintes Maries
Saint Louis port

An aerial photograph of a wide river, likely the Rhone, meandering through a lush, green valley. The river is surrounded by dense forests and some small settlements. The sky is overcast, creating a soft, diffused light over the landscape.

All rivers entail a dual journey, obviously in space but also in time. Like an archaeologist removing layer after layer of sand or earth to shed light on the past, the river crosses entire eras. Sailing down a river is like going back through the centuries.

Doubtless influenced by the presentations of the Museum of Arles, so rich and so expressive though certainly a little chauvinistic, I believed the "Upper Rhone" to be less rich in vestiges than its lower reaches in Provence, close to the mouth. The following short report will show you the extent of my error (and the depth of my ignorance).

Let's start with a little vocabulary. The name "Upper Rhone" lacks pertinence. The Upper Rhone in fact has an upper part, starting with the Furka glacier, the source of the river in the Swiss canton of Valais. And there is nothing higher than the source for a river, unless one considers, quite rightly, that the sky and its precipitations are the genuine sources. But then all rivers would have the same mother and father, something I'm not far from believing.

Before becoming "upper", the Rhone also crosses Lake Geneva, invites itself into France and then flows through G n issiat...

It's of no importance. Even if this portion of the river does not really deserve to be qualified as "upper", its exploration upstream of Lyon will take you into a universe of mountains of breath-taking beauty.

Our first meeting: a classroom memory, or more precisely a poem. In my day one learned poems by heart. We didn't know what a heartbreak was; it was to come later.

"Oh lake! The year has hardly finished its course
And close to the darling flows that she was to
have seen again,

Look! I come here alone to sit on this stone,
Where once you saw her seated, too!"

I remember I raised my hand to ask where the lake was. I must have told myself that it could serve me one day. If one had to suffer, why not slip into a famous suffering, and why not that of this Mr Lamartine?

I was intrigued by the teacher's answer: Lake Bourget. A strange name for a lake, that of an airport. And so, fifty-five years later, a boat awaited me so I could discover it.

The town of Aix-les-Bains which greeted us had chosen the right light: sinister. The rain poured down on this day in June 2016: an ideal atmosphere for the heartbroken. Perhaps the reception of the heartbroken could be used in a sales pitch to attract tourists.

This melancholy was not to last. Elected representatives, leaders of associations, knowledgeable environmentalists, the representatives of angling federations and business activities directly linked to the lake, many of them had boarded the boat to explain

the lake to me. And nothing brightens my soul more than a little knowledge. Knowledge tells you true tales, a change from unrequited hopes. And then the passion of all these people for THEIR lake moves me, everyone with their viewpoint, each with their competences. They are responsible for them. They work TOGETHER. A breath of fresh air in this France in turmoil! They all reminded me that it is France's largest lake : 18 kilometres long; 3.5 kilometres wide ; a surface area of 4,500 hectares and a volume close to 4 billion cubic metres. They wanted to impress me and they succeeded. They could now move on to the mechanisms.

- People think that a lake is a hole, dug out by ice long ago and since filled with water. What ignorance. A lake is a living entity and we nearly killed it. Up to the 1970s, most of the pollution came from the neighbouring towns and factories which discharged waste without treating it. Thanks to the action of all and in particular Michel Barnier (and Michel Dantin who had the grace to name only his illustrious companion in arms), our waters are clean and our fish are returning. The arctic char,

naturally, but also the pollan, also called Irish Pollan. Another thing, can you see that train passing by on your right, along the north bank? It's the Paris-Rome line. There's no risk for the passengers, but what about the hazardous products ? They pass there, alongside the water. Can you imagine one of those wagons tipping over and spilling its filthy contents into the lake? The SNCF, France's railway network, has no plans for another line for the time being.



*Laid back living and
a touch of melancholy
on the Upper Rhone*

My new friends succeed each other, each of them bringing me their information. I'm angry since I'm simply passing through.

- Before, the level of the lake rose and fell, depending on the year and the seasons. The dams have regulated all that, but with a dramatic impact. When one wants to change, that is to say change the course of Nature, she takes her revenge. Everywhere reed beds bordered the lake. They haven't withstood the violence of the storms, always striking the same places. Reed beds are the dwelling place of life. So, next year, we're going to lower the lake, despite the disapproval of the navigation companies: their boats must be able to leave the ports.

I listen, I listen and I note, but without forgetting this wonderful landscape. How can one choose where to gaze ? The mountains overlook us, and my companions name the Dent du Chat and the crest of the Charye. They tell me the story of this chateau-like building on a promontory overlooking the lake. It is the Cistercian abbey of Hautecombe, of which the first buildings

were erected in the 12th century. It's here that the princes and princesses of the house of Savoy repose. Savoy, the gateway to the Alps and most often an Italian possession, was annexed to France only in 1860 by the treaty of Turin. Even now, in this month of June, a few crazy individuals still contest this annexation, as we shall see when passing the locks of Savières. A woman at my side is irritated. It would seem that my interest in this story annoys her. It has been some time since she tried to divert my attention to another part of the lake, straight ahead of the boat.



Everyone on deck !



The upper Rhone

- What a shame to always be in a hurry !
One day I must return. Look at this small town.
It's Châtillon and I'm the mayor.

I know plenty of elected representatives.
They all love the segment of space for which
they are responsible. But this adhesion appears
stronger here than elsewhere. It's impossible not
to be impressed by this mixture of grandeur
and fraternity, these steep, almost vertical walls
suddenly interrupted by breaks, openings,
rounder shapes of hills that slope gently to the
water. This woman and Lamartine are right.
Lake Bourget deserves a long stay.

¹ A nursery rhyme character

This is especially the case since another wonder
awaits me. Now, I will go back in time, well
before the heartbreaks. We must have passed it
ten times without noticing it. The boat heads
straight INTO the vegetation which ends
by opening up to allow us to penetrate into
an enchanted river, similar to that which so
bewitched me in the Jardin d'Acclimatation,
a lost Parisian paradise on the edge of the Bois
de Boulogne. Welcome to the realm of Dame
Tartine¹ ; much better than Disneyland, since
Nature and poetry are so present. A world
for children: houses that appear shrunken
by some clever genie ; cabins on stilts where

one can play at Robinson Crusoe ; numerous mysterious and freshly mown clearings for the comfort of picnics; cows to give milk for tea time, and no doubt foxes to give a hint of wildness ; rowing boats ready for anglers and evidently miraculous catches ; a lock that looks like a toy. And this watery corridor that winds under the trees... Such is the 4 km long Savières canal which links the lake with the Rhone. The mayor of Chanaz reigns over a fairy story, but don't speak too loudly or you'll arouse the jealousy of his colleagues.



Savières canal

It seems that this "river" sometimes flows one direction and then sometimes in the other. Can this miracle be attributed to the mayor's magic powers ?

A choice is given to you at the outlet of the lock: the "true" Rhone, littered with islets and sand banks and slowed by meanders that one could judge as "pointless"; or else you can take the canal, a real canal cut through the earth, linear and lined with concrete. It imprisons the wild beast of the Rhone, sometimes berserk and wilfully overflowing. At this point you understand the history and geography of the Rhone. Man has tried to "domesticate" it all the way to the sea. The valley bears the traces of these titanic works everywhere until the mouth. They haven't stopped for nearly three centuries and we can safely bet that they'll continue forever.

I admit that I didn't know the fine word "dinanderie"². Thanks to the Rhone, I now know that it is a medieval art of smelting brass that has been handed down and now practiced at a factory where copper is worked.

² Brassware forging



Arriving at the lock

Several generations have succeeded each other at Lavours, north of Belley, to practice this once highly profitable trade. A craftsman carries on this tradition and can explain the secrets of his calling to you. Thus, carried by the flow of the river we pass by countless industrial sites, most of which have been abandoned though some are still in good health. A river is more than just a trade route.

I thought my share of marvels was over after my discovery of the Savières canal. In spite of my appetite for pleasure and the occasional

discovery of words, like "dinanderie" I had never heard the word "lône" (a local word for oxbow), a feminine noun in French, and, consequently, had no idea of the reality it described.

Before acting to implement partnerships within CNR, Yves Masson was a top flight sportsman, twice world kayak champion and triple winner of the Raid Gauloises !

When such a man offers to take you on an expedition, you don't hesitate to accept, with trust and enthusiasm. I've had but meagre experience of paddling, apart from a few excursions along the coast of my north Brittany and two days in Alaska to observe sea otters at play. The strong current of the Rhone can but impress a beginner, even if it is kind enough to push the long boat forwards for you. For a while I was beginning to feel like an athlete when the champion asked me to veer leftwards. The vegetation on the bank opens up as with the Savières canal. A small inrush of water profits from our passage. We simply needed to follow it to find ourselves somewhere in Amazonia or on one of the countless tributaries of the Ogoué in Gabon. Suddenly we find ourselves



*Wandering through a nature
preServe*

in a tunnel of vegetation reminiscent of our last mission to Guiana. Above us, the trees form a vault under which we have to duck our heads since a trunk has keeled over and would bar our passage if it could. On either side is a green rampart dominated by the invasive species *Fallopia Japonica*, frustrating our curiosity. It's impossible to surprise the life in the undergrowth. But, little by little, our eyes

sharpen in the dim light. Under the vegetation, we can see perforations and long traces on the damp earth banks: the traces of beavers. Up to now muddy, the water suddenly becomes clearer. Now's the moment! We lean carefully so as not to capsize the kayak. Underneath, we can see a gravel bed at less than one meter depth. A spawning ground! Barbell, trout and grayling for the lotic oxbows (with fast currents) ; carp, bitterling and even pike for the lentic oxbows (slow currents), all kinds of fish that come here to perpetuate their species. Birds like the kingfisher and the merganser duck sing with insistence, no doubt to ask us not to disturb the fish. One can find close to 170 species of bird in the National Nature Reserve of the Iles du Haut Rhône that we've just crossed! Behind me, Yves tells of the early morning on the oxbows, when the deer come to drink, and the autumn days when the mist covers the surface of the water. We slide noiselessly in a strange world. It seems unimaginable that the large and "civilised" RHONE is flowing only a stone's throw away, just on the other side of this plantation of poplars. The first meeting with

a human being since two hours ago : a person not so young. He is rowing. His boat disappears beneath iron cages. Goodness! Of course, they're crayfish traps. We salute him and I dare ask a stupid question about his trade. He looks down on me and answers with pride :

- Me, sir ? I'm fishing with traps !

A few years ago, these oxbows well deserved their description as "dead" branches of the Rhone. Yes, they were dead! As nobody cared for them, nobody ventured in them. Anyway, one had to fight one's way through an inextricable tangle of trunks and branches. The decision was taken to resuscitate these "dead" reaches in the framework of the Compagnie Nationale du Rhône's missions in the general interest. However, a method for doing it had to be defined. How could they be opened without denaturing them ? To what extent should they be lopped and cleared, and the bed dredged? This rehabilitation could not have been carried out without close and trusting collaboration between CNR's teams and environmental protection associations. The result merits praise and thanks. Thank you !

The glorious past of the small town of Villebois, a former very important ancient Roman site, includes the remains of a theatre and an amphitheatre unearthed by archaeologists. Also of note are strange enclosures, vestiges of another fine and more recent era. Instead of using steel wire, round posts and cement walls, some of the fields here are bounded by slabs of a beautiful light coloured stone ; yes, authentic



A fisherman with traps

slabs that can reach two meters in height and two to five centimetres thick. And on the square in front of the town hall there is a monument that reaches skywards to celebrate the centenary of the French Revolution. The Tourist office tells you proudly that it is the heaviest block of stone (42 tons) extracted from a French quarry. This activity developed from the middle of the 17th century reached its zenith around the middle of the 19th. In those days nearly one thousand two hundred stone

cutters worked in Villebois. The stones were loaded onto barges that sailed down the Rhone, which were sometimes subject to terrible wrecks, notably when crossing the rapids of the neighbouring town, Sault Brenaz, which was not a municipality at the time, in the administrative meaning of the term. There too,

stone was the main occupation : one third of the workers cut stone, another third transported it and the last third were wine growers. The word "sault" (waterfall) is evocative enough not to have to explain it. These greatly appreciated

stones were used to build a large number of prestigious buildings, including part of Lyon City Hall. It seems that they were even exported to New York. The barges returned empty, drawn by horses or men on the tow path traces of which can still be



The old lock of Sault Brenaz

seen. From 1930 onwards, the quarries closed one after the other, ruined by the invention of cement and then concrete.

The river, a former source of wealth but also of drownings, has gradually become a site for sport and leisure.

A white water stadium, a very small diversion

of the Rhone, was opened at Sault Brenaz in 1986. 600 metres long, it is equipped for practicing kayaking, which means that it is steep, its current strong, and its course barred by enormous rocks (to increase the difficulty and thus pleasure). Furthermore, a network of iron wires overhangs the circuit: slalom gates are suspended from them and moved wherever the coaches desire (the sadists!). A campsite there can accommodate 180 people. Open from February to the end of November, every year the centre welcomes 45,000 people many of whom are foreign (Germans, Dutch, British). Tourists seeking thrills, but they are also colleagues of

my friend Yves and top flight sportsmen and women. The teams of many countries come to share the very turbulent waters of this river with schoolchildren. A generous and strong character is needed to manage such a centre, where people of every age and expectation get together in an atmosphere that can warm up with a little help from beer. One can see at first glance that Fabienne is this rare character.

Goodbye Bugey, which so few people know and which hardly anybody realises is the southern extension of the magnificent Jura, my other recent discovery, thanks to my book on Louis



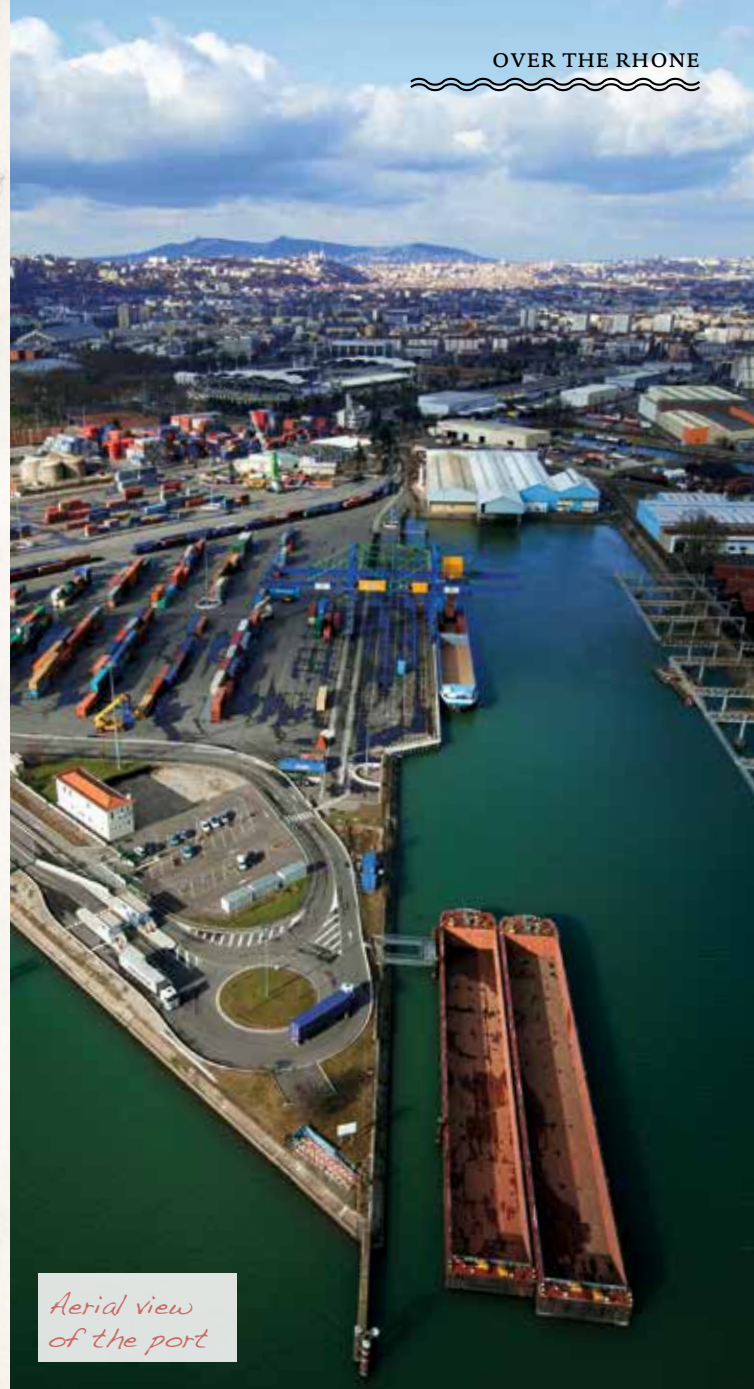
*The white water stadium of
Sault Brenaz.
45,000 tourists every year*

Pasteur, a citizen of Arbois. Decidedly, our France brims with treasures. The Bucopa, the Bugey Côtier Plaine de l'Ain, a semi-public establishment, is determined to defend it. I once chaired the National School of Landscape Engineering, so you can imagine that,

like them, I am a militant when it comes to defending remarkable sites. Goodbye Bugey. I promise to return soon. We must shortly get lost in the narrow valleys that lead upstream to Switzerland.



For now let's go downstream with the flow and a change of scenery. The fields have given way to warehouses. A new energy pervades the air. The entry into the city has a physical effect. Soon buildings rise from the ground. Here is a city, a very large city. And here, after the ecological and sports developments, CNR is involved in a completely different realm of action : PLEH, or if one prefers more clarity Port de Lyon Édouard Herriot. It extends over 184 hectares, including 110 on land. This area may seem large, though it is fact small in view of the growing needs it fulfils, but it can no longer grow : the reason is that it is in the heart of the city. This advantage in terms of logistical proximity has a price: urban imprisonment. The port must content itself with the square metres available to it. There's no chance of seeing it compete successfully with the greed of property developers that lurk waiting for the least opportunity to build on these sites on the water's edge in an increasingly sought after district. Another disadvantage of this central situation is the risks. A port accommodates hazardous activities, carried out in installations



*Aerial view
of the port*

of which many are classified "Seveso high". There are risks of explosion, fire and spills of toxic products just a few steps away from dwellings.

All this means that the Company's mission is not simple, as it has been given the task of managing this port directly. All these activities are gathered within a structure called MEDLINK. Regarding the other ports of the Rhone, CNR has transferred its concessions to the local Chambers of Commerce and Industry. This is the case for Arles, Porte-lès-valence, Salaise and so on. In addition, as its name implies, Voies Navigables de France (Navigable Waterways

of France), retains responsibility for all these waterways.

It should be known that more than 1,300 people work DIRECTLY for the port.

I receive my first lessons on the port, with a dash of deep and almost Asiatic wisdom that no one can ignore, from Julien Langendorf. For example, there is this maxim : "it's the void that determines the full". I'll interpret. The capacity to receive full containers depends solely on the efficient management of empty ones.

This is the primordial condition for building a hub, a real container port. But in such a confined space, isn't it a waste to have such

The end of the basin



Emptiness determines capacity



a large area occupied by ... nothing!

Other headaches are: how can the different modes of transport (river, road, rail, pipelines) and the different ways of transporting (bulk and containers) be combined optimally? How can access to the port be opened without encroaching on the city, without stirring protests from its inhabitants? In other words, how is it possible to escape this contradiction, observed everywhere, especially in Montreal: the port is a vital driving force for the city; but who in the city really accepts the port, the port and its noise, visual, olfactory and security nuisances? And how is it possible, within the perimeter of the port, to manage the traffic, trains crossing each other, trucks, cranes, etc.? How can one make suggestions (more or less subtly) to the managers of an incineration plant or a storage platform?

Common sense, diplomacy, stubbornness, the culture of performance (instead of sticking to the lazy "obligation of means"). Many qualities are needed to manage a port! Once day, a French Prime Minister, Lionel Jospin, thought it wise to kill off the project for a canal that was to link

the Rhone with the Rhine. To save three frogs, the ecologists, strangely allied in this affair with the lobbies of the road and rail transport sectors, made this the condition of their participation in a "plural" majority. Since then, though Port de Lyon has done its best, it remains bereft of its natural outlet. Especially since at Marseille,



*On board the Noémie,
the solar powered boat*



At the controls of the simulator at Promofluvia

the irresponsibility of certain dockers hardly attracts ship-owners to use it as a stopover. This has led some to say that "the Rhone starts with a barrier (Marseille) and ends in a cul-de-sac (Lyon)". By way of comparison, one should be aware that the port of Strasbourg receives TWICE the traffic of Lyon, and covers TEN times more land.

Do you dream of becoming a skipper?

You see yourself as the sole master after God of one of these river cruise liners for tourists or one of these very long oil tankers or river barges that sail down to Port Saint Louis and the Mediterranean? Then come to train at Promofluvia, a centre funded by CNR, Cerema, VNF, the committee of boat-owners and the Feder, a European fund. You'll take the helm of a spellbindingly real simulator. The river is recreated in three dimensions; the river with its traps; the river with its violent winds ; the river and its arches ;

the river and its meanders that would be easy to navigate if you weren't in charge of a boat 135 metres long, a mass that will not deign to react to your commands until after dozens of long, frantically long and anxious seconds of inertia. I tried it. All went well in the beginning, but close to Fourvière, I admit my barge collided with the quay. In the real world, I would have sunk along with my cargo.

Fortunately, Vienne awaited me with the many comforts it gives so generously. What is more, I am received in a kitchen, that which the brand new Pavillon du Tourisme has chosen to place in its centre. The tone has been set, confirmed by the words of greeting (as warm as surprising) from the Mayor Thierry Kovacs, "Welcome home !".



A gleam in his eye, he told me that the French Academy owned the Colombier estate on the land of his town: six hectares on which 120 tons of pears are produced, of which 100 are reserved for making alcohol. How could I have been oblivious of this production under the auspices of my own dear Academy ?

Nonetheless, as a former gastronomic columnist for the Gault & Millau magazine, I knew of the great tradition of the local cuisine. How many times had I met a pupil of Fernand Point, the first chef to have obtained the supreme award of three stars from Michelin, as far back as 1933 ? Paul Bocuse, the Père Bise, Alain Chapel, the Troisgros brothers, etc. The whole world came to feast in his restaurant La Pyramide. Now, Patrick Henrion has valiantly taken up the flame.

I dare not forget my ritual appointment later with the brunette and the blond just on the other side of the river in the municipalities of Ampuis, Saint Cyr and Tupin et Semons, where the hills of Côte Rôtie lie. 290 hectares on steep slopes; each hectare is now worth more than a million euros. Étienne Guigal equalled Fernand Point when it comes to this magnificent designation of origin (this Côte (hill) is Rôtie (roasted) by the sun), and the magic grape variety (Syrah), a visionary at the same time as being an organiser. As far back as 1946, he founded an estate that has since extended constantly, to offer other gifts from both the north and south

of the Rhone valley: Condrieu, Hermitage red and white, Châteauneuf du Pape, Saint-Joseph, also in two colours, not to forget Gigondas, and more. Today, a rather less legendary but just as talented winegrower, Yves Lafoy, accompanies me on these stony terraces ("chayets" in local parlance). Once again, I hail the work of these men that shape flat surfaces out of the slope to plant the vines.

Once again, I admire the design which, between the green of the vines, gives the stones (the "cheys") of these walls their brown patina. Following our expedition, it will be time to open a few bottles to restore ourselves after the effort. Rather than you should hear ill-intentioned information from heinous sources, I take it upon myself to tell you that an Academy other than the French Academy wanted me among its members, the French Wine Academy. Founded by Curnonsky in 1933, this heart-warming institution has been given the mission of "Defending the wines of France and teaching

knowledge on them, combating fraud, deception and even ignorance ..."

Like many other towns on the banks of the Rhone, following the demise of the textile industry, Vienne has had to find other activities: industry is still present with paper production, there is the company Béal,

which despite its small size (fewer than 50 employees), is world leader in mountaineering rope fabrication, and there are also services, for example Ingerop (an engineering office specialised in construction and infrastructure engineering).

But culture remains a priority and a driving force of local dynamism to attract tourists. Gallo-Roman remains have their enthusiasts although the greatest success has been achieved with music.

Every year, the Jazz À Vienne festival draws more than 200,000 music lovers ! I think that the Rhone slows down a pace to listen to Ibrahim Maalouf, Pink Martini and Diana Krall.



This same Rhone which must be unable to stop itself from chuckling when it sees so many cars and trucks jammed at standstill along its free and flowing waters! Apparently, in four years' time a new interchange will divert some of this traffic (100,000 vehicles a day!), and relieve poor Vienne. The Rhone will applaud when this happy moment arrives, and if the government keeps its promises. For the time being, it continues to flow, which is its way of amusing itself and doubting about human intelligence.



We thought we had finished with chemicals, omnipresent in Lyon's southern suburbs: Pierre Bénite, Saint-Fons, La Mulatière, Feyzin, Solaize. But they reappear in Roussillon, 20 kilometres south of Vienne. Already well occupied by its different trades, CNR was not given the responsibility of managing the Osiris platform that groups the activities of some of the largest industrial companies in the sector: Adisseo, Novacyl, Bluestar, etc.

No, in fact, one must cross a branch of the Rhone to reach the Ile de la Platière to find a new example of its action in favour of the environment. In March 1986, a Nature Reserve was set up following years of debate between all the stakeholders, mainly industrial companies and farmers: how was land-use going to be distributed? How much water could be withdrawn from the river and to the profit of whom? Seven years later, the great flood of 1993 stirred the nature conservationists.

An association with nine employees was founded to manage this reserve of 500 hectares. A quarter of its budget of €400,000 is provided by the Ministry of the Environment

while the rest comes from different donations. The association watches over the flora and fauna, and organises meetings and circuits to inform the public about them. It dialogues with CNR so that the latter modulates the flowrates of its hydraulic structures optimally. The results of this good understanding were quick in coming. The European otter has returned, as has the salamander due to the quality of the water. The salamander is a good marker of a site's environmental quality. Regarding the Osiris platform's need for water,

the problems stem more from warming than from the quantity withdrawn, which is lowering constantly (though it nonetheless amounts to 130,000 cubic meters a day).

For some time, no matter how passionate I become for these worlds I discover, and no matter how applied I am as a student, missing no explanation and taking notes, always and still noting in my yellow notebook, I am being overwhelmed by impatience. I know these neurological troubles well :



The Rhone in front of the Ile de la Platière

these spontaneous movements, the tensing of every muscle, these twitches in the wings of my nose when approaching the sea. I can feel it, there, I can guess it, not far to the south. Serge, my guide (and also Deputy Director of the Avignon Region), succeeds in calming me by showing me the landscape. I have to admit I am privileged. Just imagine: I am now in the middle of the Rhone, or more precisely on the roof of the Beaucaire hydropower plant (commissioned in 1970, equipped with six bulb turbine units with an installed capacity of 210MW, and built next to a wide gauge lock measuring 195mx12m,

whose construction required the movement of 50 million cubic meters, and used 500,000 cubic meters of concrete).

Before me flows the great river up which a long river cruiser full of tourists (135 metres, 150 passengers) sails. It will berth at the brand new landing stage. I won't see the eels take the magnificent pass that has been dedicated to them ! Apparently 400,000 of them have passed through it recently ! On the right, the chateau of Beaucaire overlooks a wooded hill. On the left is the crenelated summit of the chateau of Tarascon. I still see before me the large map



The hydropower plant of Beaucaire



in the conference room presenting all the “development schemes of the vallabregues head” that include Avignon and the mouth of the River Durance. Once again, the magnitude of this human endeavour is impressive: hundreds of kilometres of dikes, excavations, rises in level, billions of cubic metres transported, billions of hours of labour, inevitable accidents, deaths that could have been avoided. Once again the obvious is verified: geography is not mere data; it’s also a will. The Camargue will provide us with more striking proof of this. The more I know about the Rhone valley, the more I respect the relentless work of all these generations to tame the fury of this river.

Tarascon town centre.

Six spaces in the Place du Colonel Berrurier are reserved for electric cars. Two high red and white boxes are placed in front of them: at first sight, gasoline pumps, signalled by these carefully rolled pipes on each side. But look more closely. One is struck by three words in English : MOVE IN PURE. So it must be “pure” energy. Why use English in the heart of Provence where foreigners come precisely because it is one of the hearts of France? When will “marketing experts” understand that nothing is more distressing, inefficient and hackneyed than employing a global language to qualify local realities ? Let us calm our anger to hail an initiative worthy of great praise. A geographic map explains the ambition on what I thought was a pump and which is in fact an electric charging point. We know that the first barrier to the multiplication of electric vehicles and the anguish of car drivers is their fear of finding themselves at a standstill, unable to recharge their batteries in time. So CNR had the good idea of establishing an ELECTRIC CORRIDOR. This entails installing a network of charging

points along the entire length of the Rhone, from Lake Geneva to the Mediterranean, never further away from each other than thirty kilometres. Finished, the fear of finding oneself stranded! The second advantage of MOVE IN PURE is the guarantee that the electricity supplied will be of 100% renewable origin. The third advantage of the installation : the possibility of fast charging, in thirty minutes, near shops and cafés instead of walking aimlessly in a service station or reading a newspaper at one's steering wheel as the only solutions to kill time. I sincerely applaud this project when I become aware of a continuous hum more or less merged in the decibels of the Tarascon traffic. It seems to me to come from the charging points.

Slightly embarrassed, Serge Barrère, explains that like all motors, those of the charging points needed ventilation, just like the engines of cars. At the risk of blunting his (justified) enthusiasm for this Corridor, I asked him whether the neighbouring population complained about this purring. His sing-song reply in the inventive accent of his southwest France (why, oh why MOVE IN PURE?),

³ French film director and scenarist

was worthy of inclusion in an anthology of citations, as good as the best Audiard³ :

- I wouldn't say it was noisy, rather that it is not inaudible.



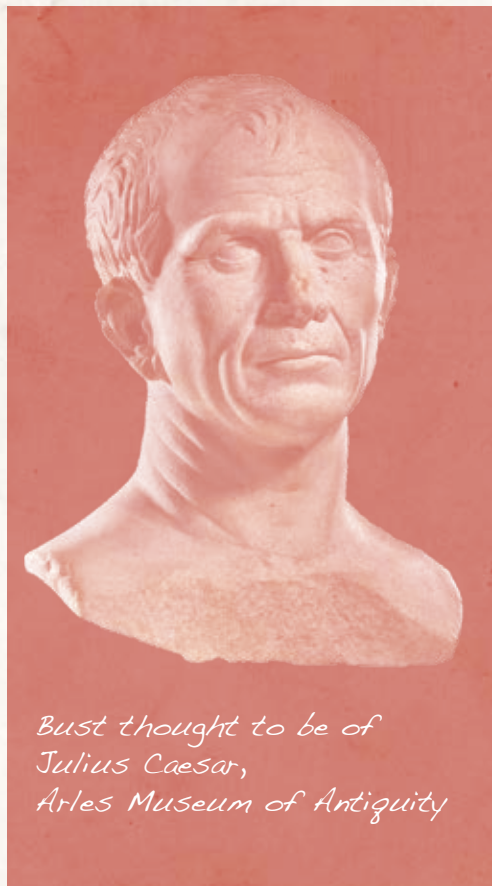
Michel Laclotte, the Director of the Louvre Museum, once did me the honour of asking me to present my favourite museums to him. I didn't yet know the Arles Museum of Antiquity. It would certainly have been near the top of my list. Of course, for the wealth of its collections of mosaics, sarcophaguses and sculptures, including the admirable head

of Julius Caesar. Of course, for this incredible 31 metre long barge lifted intact from the mud of the Rhone. Of course, for all these objects that evoke daily life so well, from the jewellery to the amphora, to the recycled materials to the anchors of boats. Of course, for these lead pipes that prove how advanced Roman administration was in supplying water. But also for the geographic intelligence and clarity of its pedagogy. Here is a museum that gets one to understand that History and Geography are BOUND TOGETHER ! Thank you to the museum!

Immediately on entering one sees a map showing the network of roads built by the Romans, and the central importance of the

city of Arles, its role of "hub" as we say today. And throughout the circuit, other maps explain to you at a glance the incredible commercial

network active at different eras of Antiquity. In those days, the Empire stretched from England to Palmyra, and from Persia to Morocco. And the Rhone was always a corridor of prime importance. So that is why so many treasures are found in its bed. Seen spatially, with this network of roads, canals and so forth, Julius Caesar and the Roman Empire are the ancestors of multimodality, free trade and globalisation. Such a museum could not have emerged without



*Bust thought to be of
Julius Caesar,
Arles Museum of Antiquity*

considerable private funding. The partnership with CNR proves the efficiency of trusting and long-term sponsorship.



The Camargue !

Twice daughter of the Rhone !

By the sediments that it drains and of which it is composed ;

By the water it provides and which gives life to the plants.

The Camargue, rich from two crops !

The first when, to cure grapevine of the parasite phylloxera, no better solution was found but to submerge the feet of the vines. Winegrowers came from everywhere to restart on this new and easily floodable land.

The second with the idea of using all this water to grow rice. And why not employ those who know the secrets of this crop, that is to say "supplementary" Indochinese workers, or in other words forced labourers come from our Asian colonies. This use of cheap labour is the source of a strange story. In 1940, Pétain launched rice-growing to feed the famished French population. These unfortunate labourers were used in return for a wage for work in the public interest. However the amount of this wage was paid to the army, which was responsible

for paying it to the labourers. They waited a long time and are still waiting : 20,000 came and only 2,000 remained after the development of rice growing. Their descendants are rare today !

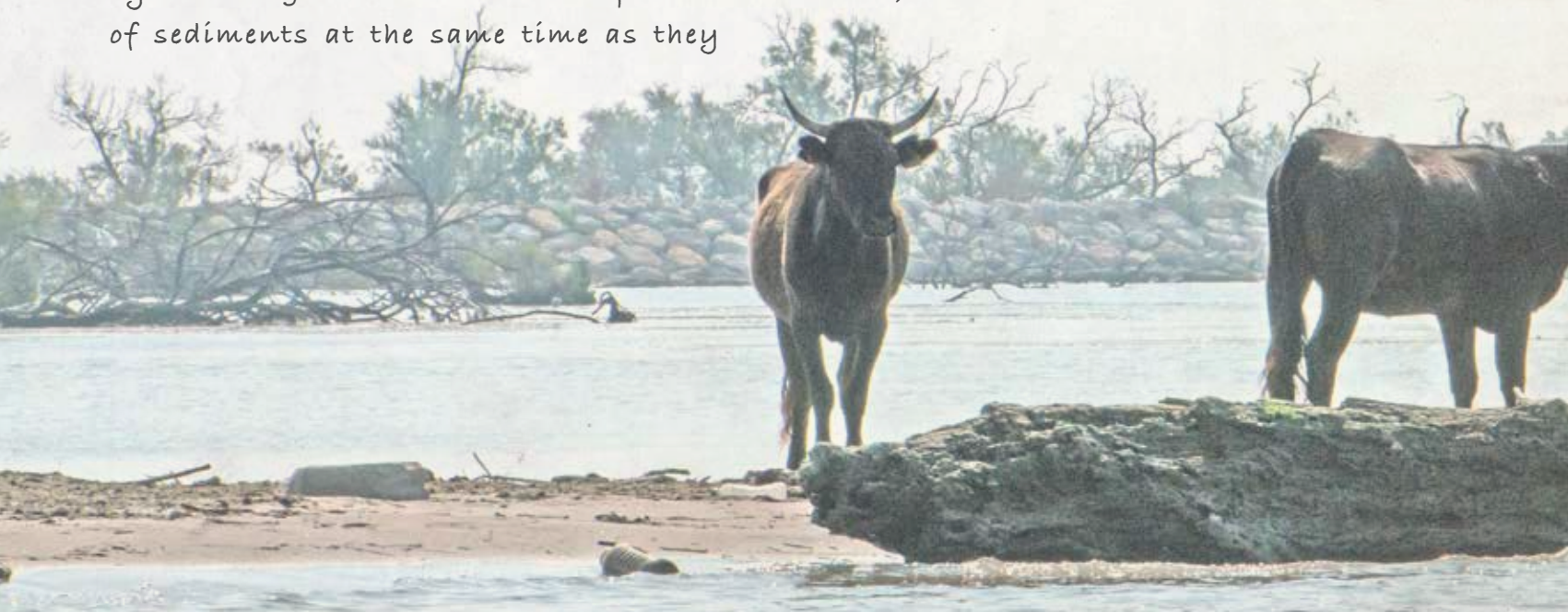
The Camargue faces two threats from water ! From the freshwater of the Rhone, that which gives life but which also destroys during floods, such as the reference flood of 1856 which remains imprinted in horrified memory, and also more recently, that of 1993 which breached the dikes.

Like all deltas, the Camargue is also threatened by the rising sea level and the compaction of sediments at the same time as they

are becoming less abundant due to massive pumping from the river and the subsequent lower flowrate. The figures make one dizzy : 3 litres a second are pumped for rice-growing ; 40 cubic metres a second are withdrawn to irrigate the Camargue. In all, 400 million cubic metres are withdrawn every year for agriculture whereas 20 million cubic metres of salt water are withdrawn for salt production.

The Camargue !

One must read the reference book, *L'espace et le temps en Camargue*⁴ by Bernard Picon (with delectation).



One should also listen to the true story recounted by Régis Vianet, the Director of the Regional Natural Park of the Camargue, which covers 100,000 hectares. We listen to him explain to us the trajectory of the "Ligurian current" that gnaws the coast despite all the rocks amassed on it. We also plunge into the universe of the Camargue by visiting the museum supervised by its enthusiastic Director, Estelle Rouquette (also a film lover, as I shall soon prove to you).

The Camargue, the land of those who love it !

The Camargue, a land of valour and recurrent adversity ceaselessly overcome !

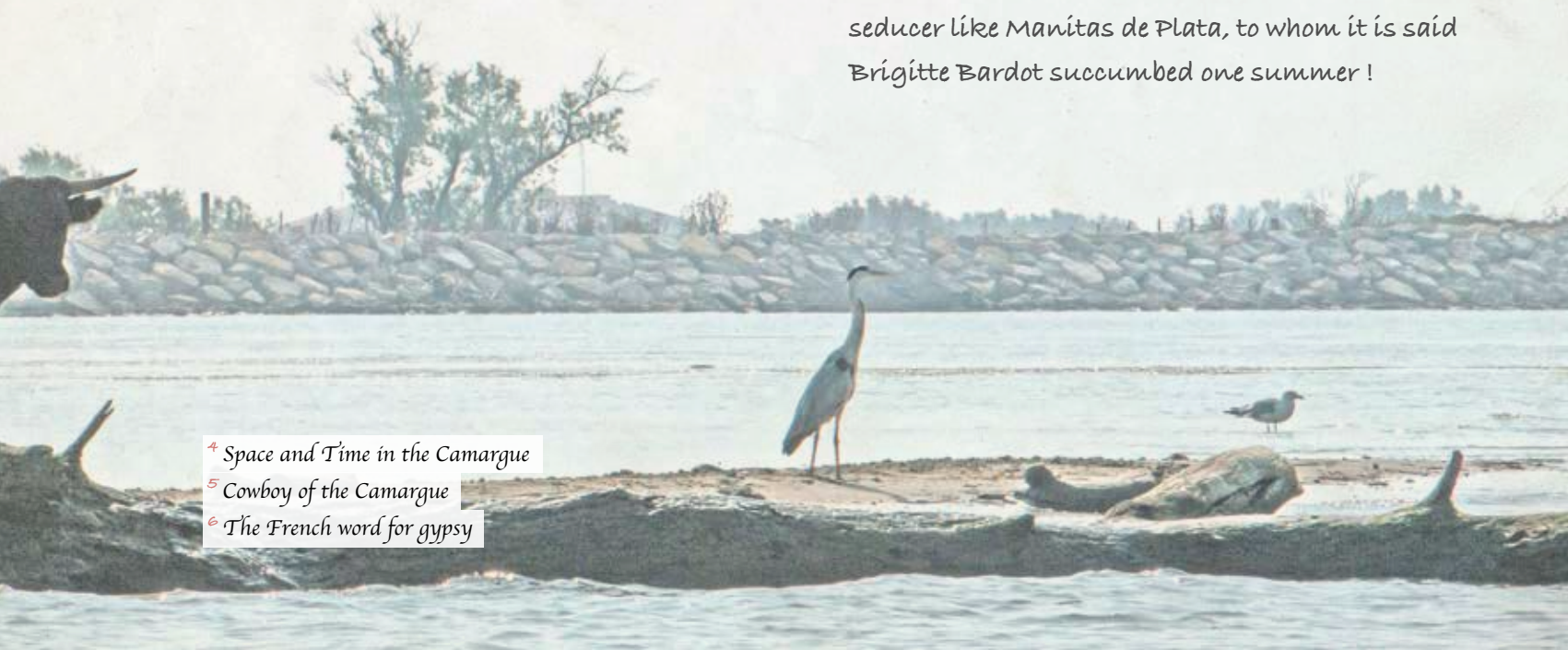
The Camargue, a lesson of genuine ecology where for generations, humanity and nature have shared the right to live, bound not by an ideology of "protection" but by the obligation for results imposed by a common destiny !

The Camargue, a land of heroes, of whom the first is the Gardian⁴, a kind of centaur who watches over the bulls and the second is the Gitan⁵, a nomad, religious, musician, and seducer like Manitas de Plata, to whom it is said Brigitte Bardot succumbed one summer !

⁴ Space and Time in the Camargue

⁵ Cowboy of the Camargue

⁶ The French word for gypsy



The Camargue, a land of legends like that of Sara la Gitanne welcoming the Saintes Maries !

The Camargue, a studio in the open air and a site appreciated by photographers (including Lucien Clergue, who proved that he was not only interested in female nudes) and filmmakers ! Did you know that more than seventy films have been made here, including in 1952 alone, *La Caraque Blonde* by Jacqueline Audry, with a scenario by the industrialist Paul Ricard, *Le salaire de la peur* (Henri Georges Clouzot) and *Crin Blanc* by Albert Lamorisse? I dare not forget the Provencal Western by Noël Howard - *D'où viens-tu Johnny* - with our national singer as its star. The book by Estelle Rouquette and Sam Stourdze is obligatory reading if you want to know everything about this cinematographic odyssey.

When navigating on the Rhone and wishing to reach the sea, four routes are open to you, one of which is forbidden. A shame since that which prolongs the Grand Rhone is the most direct but too many sand banks await you,

too many shoals, too mobile, too treacherous, too propitious to grounding boats that quickly become wrecks due to the violence of the currents and winds. Thus, by precautionary wisdom, the Administration has forbidden this exit into the Mediterranean, which is only authorised for professional fishermen who know how to find themselves in these labyrinths appreciated by fish.

The second route is the Petit Rhône which separates from the Grand at Arles and heads alone, starboard side, away from the main branch to cross the Camargue. To take this magic route, you require a reasonably sized boat, as this branch of the river is several dozen metres wide at its widest. Thanks to the prestige and the network of our world champion, the Kayak club of Grau du Roi has invited us on a Polynesian outrigger canoe. It has six seats, so a frail old academician like me can paddle less strongly than my athletic companions without my cheating being noticed too much. I recommend this type of transport, alas too rarely used by the inhabitants of the Rhone

➤ A famous French sailor

valley. The promenade offers you solitude with only the birds for company, starting with the little egret (*Egretta garzetta*) and every species of heron. From time to time, protected by the water that separates you from them, you can come close without fear to the bulls that like to cool off on the countless river beaches. You will come across a peculiar craft for tourists, the Tiki, a very Disneyland like copy of a Mississippi paddle steamer. You will sail past villages of cabins whose residents hail you while eating their breakfast, raising their glasses

of rosé wine, and toasting "Hello, the Tabarly's⁷!". Wisely, you will avoid asking them if they are entitled to build there. Don't repeat this to the Prefect, especially when coming from an (honorary) State councillor but the clandestine has its charm and the cabin its nobility. Then, suddenly, after a long, very long, almost exhausting meander, the banks draw further apart. This must be the Mediterranean. As we progress, we can see a line of waves waiting for us. We cross them bravely, thanks to the Polynesian naval architects !



A fine crew in a dugout canoe



Tiki boat



Hello, the Tabarlys !



Port Saint Louis' lock

Thanks to this salutary cross-rigger ! So it is by the sea, like Marie Jacobé and Marie Salomé⁸, that we reach the mythical town of the gypsies, where they hold their ritual meeting in May, the Saintes Maries.

Admittedly, other routes to the sea are far less exotic but they attract much more traffic. If the business of your boat is trade, and of a size to match, it can veer to the port side and take the canal that goes directly to the Gulf of Fos. It starts at the crossing point at Bac de Barcarin and its course bordered by white wind turbines is easy to follow.

Pleasure boats are obliged to pass through the lock of Port Saint Louis, which is also open to commercial boats. This lock was opened back in 1873. Today, like all the locks of the Rhone, it is controlled directly from the navigation management centre at Châteauneuf du Rhône. But a team of four employees monitor and maintain it 24 hours a day. Their presence revealed itself to be necessary the day when a clumsily steered ship

⁸ The two Saints after which the town is named



The lift bridge of Port Saint-Louis

collided with the downstream gate of the lock and blocked the bridge linking the two parts of the town of Port Saint Louis. One can imagine the discomfort and anger of the inhabitants unable to return to their homes, or go to their workplaces. Since then, a footbridge has been installed along the lock in case of need. As soon as the warning is sounded, a crane can install it to allow road traffic to continue.

Every year, there are 10,000 lock passages, each of which can accommodate several small boats.

I can't prevent myself from questioning the usefulness of such an installation. After all, one can pass from the Grand Rhône to the sea via the Petit Rhône without a lock (see above for our Polynesian expedition).

The supervisor informs me with a kind smile that at this mouth the Mediterranean is on average forty centimetres lower than the river.

- And forty centimetres, that's no small difference !

How can I deny this truth marked with common sense ?

