Roman France

Ed Alcock for The New York Times

The Pont du Gard, an aqueduct in southern France. More Photos »

By ELAINE SCIOLINO
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THE summer evening was autumnally cold and damp, the backless stone seats in the outdoor theater unforgiving. Many of the 8,000 spectators were irritable; most of us had shown for a rained-out performance the night before.

And frankly, I've seen better productions of "Carmen." But as the performers began to move, their shadows rose 100 feet and danced across the imposing backdrop of a yellow limestone wall. A marble statue of Caesar Augustus stood ghostly white upon his perch in the wall, his right arm raised as if he had just commanded the singers to begin their performance. When Carmen sang for the last time, a bird somewhere in the black sky sang back as her shadow fell.

I had been transported into the past, watching a performance in a semicircular Roman theater in the southern French city of Orange much as spectators had done 2,000 years ago. In front of me was one of the greatest works of Roman architecture and engineering to have survived the cruelty of the centuries: a theatrical wall. Despite its scarred and stained stones, the wall stands defiantly. It is still deserving of the description: "The finest wall in my kingdom," bestowed by Louis XIV.

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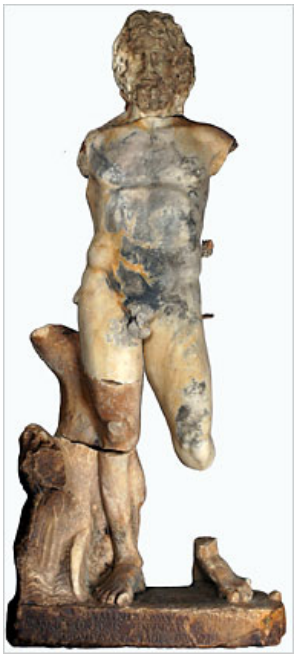

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A marble statue of Neptune, still in three pieces, at the Musée Départemental de l'Arles Antique.
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The performance ended, and the crowd spilled out into the streets below, just as it did in Roman times. Augustus, embraced by the shadows coursing across the theatrical wall, seemed to move as well.

Visitors to France do not usually seek out evidence of Rome's conquest of what was then called Gaul (now essentially modern-day France and Belgium). Indeed, the French do not dwell on their colonization by ancient Roman imperialists. Instead, they celebrate the "Gallic" part: the stories of proud, strong natives who thrived in that era. (The most popular contemporary portrayals of Roman rule in France are the comic book and film adventures of Astérix and Obélix, the Gallic village heroes who use stealth and cunning against the Roman invaders.)

Over the years, I have discovered traces of Roman civilization throughout the country, from Arras in the north to Dijon in the center and Fréjus in the south. My hunt for Roman Gaul has turned up treasures in the oddest places, including the middle of wheat fields, the foundations of churches and the basements of dusty provincial museums.

Then I asked Patrick Périn, the director of the Musée des Antiquités Nationales just west of Paris, which houses the country's finest Gallo-Roman collection, the best way to explore Roman France. He said he had two words for me: "Go south."

Set aside for a moment images of Provence's lavender fields, the Riviera's beaches and Marseille's bouillabaisse. The southeastern swath of the country seems as crammed with ancient Rome as Rome itself: temples, theaters, amphitheaters, aqueducts, roads, arches, monuments, mosaics and every sort of object from daily life.

The South of France was the first region annexed by the Romans, in about 125 B.C., decades before Julius Caesar brought the rest of Gaul under his control. The area was ancient Rome with a French twist, a synergistic blend of two cultures and lifestyles that left a permanent imprint on both of them.

The Romans relied on the native aristocracy to administer local governments. Many Gauls became citizens of Rome. Gallic silver, glass, pottery, food and wine were exported to Italy. At a factory near Millau in the Massif Central, for example, slaves mass-produced pottery for the western half of the Roman Empire, including the entire Roman army.

To appreciate the best of Gallo-Roman France today requires only a vivid imagination and surprisingly little driving. I visited the area in several trips from Paris, but it can be covered in three or four days.

If French history books tend to underplay ancient Roman rule, local politicians and entrepreneurs in the south do not. In the summer, area restaurants offer "Roman" menus with 2,000-year-old recipes: dishes prepared with cumin, coriander, mint and honey.

In Orange, the Théâtre Antique d'Orange hosts "Roman" festivals twice a year, featuring fake gladiators, processions and demonstrations of ancient Olympic games.

The Mas des Tourelles vineyard in Beaucaire organizes "wine harvests" in which Roman methods for making wine are re-enacted: grapes are crushed under the feet of "slaves" (staff members who work at the winery). On hand is a replica of a Roman wine press and amphorae for storing the wine; of course there are also wine tastings.

Residents co-exist with their antiquities with a blend of pride and nonchalance. A seller of old books in Nîmes displays his collection of Roman artifacts in a glass case; the Hôtel d'Arlatan in Arles has a glass floor on which guests can walk and peer down at the remains of ancient baths more than 20 feet below.

For me, the epicenter of Roman Gaul is Nîmes, once one of the largest cities of the empire, called by locals "the Rome of France," and like Rome, built on seven hills. Its amphitheater, although heavily restored, is well preserved. Unlike at Rome's Colosseum, where passing cars and motorbikes pierce the tranquillity of the site with their noise and fumes, traffic is restricted around the Nîmes amphitheater.

1 | 2 | 3 NEXT PAGE >

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This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: May 17, 2009

A picture caption this weekend with a cover article about Roman sites in southeastern France refers incorrectly to the age of a fountain in Arles. The fountain shown on the cover in the shape of the head of Hercules is 17th century; it does not date to the Roman Empire.

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