

Charmed by an old beauty

Don't be put off by first impressions about this French city, writes **Karen Reymont**

WHEN first I saw Vienne, I gave her only a sideways glance from the motorway sandwiched between her facade and the rushing Rhone.

I glimpsed a city that had burned the candle at both ends — tired and tattered and in need of a hot bath.

Her name kept popping up, piquing my interest. So I took a day to become acquainted with her. Underneath she was softer, more approachable and quite the lady, and I learned from her stories that she had depth, colour and eloquence.

I began my day with her at the tourism office, greeted by an English-speaking gentleman who offered me a guided tour, also written in English. Often guides are only available in French, leaving English-speaking tourists mystified when trying to decipher historical facts.

There's free parking in the back streets behind Vienne's tourist office. You'll have a 10-minute walk into town, but money saved can be spent on morning tea of tres bon éclair vanille from the artisan Boulanger/Pâtissier, la Maison des Pains. I sat in the tranquillity of the Jardin Public to devour my éclair, the memory of winter evoked by still-naked trees.

I am not usually one for formula tourism, but I relinquished control and, with map in hand, followed the 3km trail of bronze plaques inlaid in Vienne's footpaths.

I meandered through old and new Vienne. The dilapidated 5th to 6th-century church of Saint-Pierre made me appreciate restoration work I had seen performed on historic buildings in other cities I have explored.

The church, one of France's oldest, tells of a tumultuous life, with windows in such disrepair only the lead between the shattered panes holds remnants of what used to be.

It's beautiful though, like lines on a face. Saint-Pierre houses an archaeological museum displaying mosaics and sculptures including Tutela, Vienne's guardian goddess.

The cathedral of Saint-Maurice can be seen from the far side of the Rhone, perched aloft stairs almost as wide as the cathedral itself.

Huddled in the arched doorway is one of life's homeless, hungrily spooning soup from a bowl, his crusty bread lying on the dirty ground.

Inside, before the long row of Romanesque archways, I noticed the sun illuminating a leadlight window, its geometric shapes not unlike the patterns on the Partridge family bus ... but I digress.

As is often the case in European cities, it was a surprise to arrive in Place Charles de Gaulle to find the 20BC temple of Augustus and Livia. Locals sat in a sidewalk cafe seemingly unaware of the history before them, with tall, ribbed pillars reaching into the clouds. Snap-happy tourists like me stood in awe, drinking in the beauty.

Farther along is Jardin de Cyble, showing excavated remains of a Gallo-Roman neighbourhood. I wandered up the base of Mt Pipet to one of the largest theatres in Roman antiquity from 40-50AD, capable of seating 11,000 spectators and still in use today during Vienne's annual jazz festival in July. It now wears the scars of modernity, and history's soft palette has been disfigured with metal stairs and railings.

At the end of Cours Romestang is the red-awninged La Taverne de Maitre Kanter, perfect for a budget-friendly bite and beer. I can vouch for the flammekuches, a thin-based pizza-style tart from the Alsace region, topped with cream, sweet



Food for thought: Stroll past a painted wall in one of Vienne's many historical streets (above); before indulging in a gastronomic delight or two from the artisan Boulanger/Pâtissier, la Maison des Pains (left)



VIENNE

GO Vienne is half-an-hour's drive south of Lyon in the heart of France.

EAT La Maison des Pains Pâtissier/Boulanger, 12 Cours de Verdun. La Taverne de Maitre Kanter, 61 Cours Romestang. La Pyramide, 14 Boulevard Fernand Point (www.lapyramide.com).

STAY La Pyramide, 14 Boulevard Fernand Point.

MORE Tourist office, Cours Brillier, Vienne. www.culture.gouv.fr/culture/arcnat/vienne/fr/

onions and bacon. Hardly regional dining, but one is allowed to break with tradition occasionally. Swill an Adelscott beer, which for me had aromas of the beer Dad sipped while sitting outside the caravan during holidays spent in Australia's summer heat. Adelscott has nuances of malt and whisky, a touch of caramel, and is awfully good.

The importance of gastronomy is not lost on Vienne, only half-an-hour by car from Lyon, the gastronomic heart of France.

To dine in Vienne's two-Michelin-starred La Pyramide Restaurant will require an advance booking. La Pyramide, now owned by Patrick Henriroux, was founded by the legendary master of la grande cuisine Fernand Point, and lies on Boulevard Fernand Point beside the historic Pyramid of the Roman Hippodrome.

Aurelie greeted me inside a foyer of bevelled-glass doors, fracturing the

view of the green courtyard where just-bloomed daffodils and pansies splashed colour around a garden of conical trees and boxed hedges.

Establishments as revered as La Pyramide have planned ahead to accommodate the recent economic downturn with the opening of a tranquil, brasserie-style dining-room where white-hatted chefs cook breakfast-to-order in the dining-room kitchen. Clients now have the lunchtime choice of dining in the brasserie, if the formal dining room of La Pyramide is financially out of reach.

I remember my first glimpse of Vienne and how wrong I was about her. I waved goodbye from a distance, halfway across the footbridge leading to the far side of the Rhone, which was still in a rush, too busy to notice the beauty it was passing.

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