

CRUISING
MEDITERRANEAN

Marseille inspired the nickname for what would become the French national anthem, above; The spires of Gaudi's La Sagrada Familia in Barcelona, main. PHOTOS: GETTY

When the English travel writer Richard Lassels coined the phrase "The Grand Tour" in the 17th century, I doubt he imagined the custom and term would stick.

By the 19th century, however, The Grand Tour had become a rite of passage for aristocratic youths who, along with their chaperones, traversed The Continent to refine their knowledge of the classics. They visited galleries, gardens and ancient ruins, especially in Italy, which was favoured for its Renaissance art and architecture.

My recent Viking cruise of the "Iconic Western Mediterranean" reminds me of a Grand Tour, albeit a contemporary one. The eight-day journey from Rome to Barcelona includes onshore excursions led by resident guides in Florence, Villefranche-sur-Mer, Marseille and Sète.

The itinerary covers several eras, though Renaissance treasures feature extensively on the program.

Renaissance, of course, means "rebirth", which seems apt for the cruising industry today. Luxury cruise line Viking recommenced cruising in May 2021, after COVID-19 had battered the industry and disrupted sailings for more than a year.

It's ironic that historically, it was an epidemic that helped to shape the Renaissance. At an evening lecture on board the Viking Sky, Mike Seigel (a British historian and one of several experts travelling with us) explains how the bubonic plague, along with famine and wars, transformed 15th- and 16th-century Italy's economy, religion and culture.

An explosion of interest in classical antiquity and humanism followed in Florence, then an Italian City State dominated by the Medici family. This prominent banking clan, and later ducal house, was a significant patron of the arts, commissioning the likes of Leonardo da Vinci, Botticelli and Michelangelo.

I'm familiar (if rusty) with the Italian-focused content of the cruise thanks to my fine arts studies of long ago. It's helpful to revise, though, because Italy is our destination for the next two days. I soak up the summary – many years of history crammed into an hour – along with a gin and tonic, courtesy of the theatre bar. (This disproves the notion, heard in cruising circles, of "drinkers or thinkers"; the two, I discover, are not mutually exclusive).

The next morning, we get drenched during our onshore excursion to Pisa. Rain ricochets off the six white and grey limestone galleries of the Leaning Tower, remarkable for its inclination. Distracted by the unpleasant showers and, with fogged up glasses, I have only a misty recollection of this spectacle.

Back on board ship, I savour a cup of tea in the Wintergarden Conservatory. Within this massive glass cube are branches stencilled in wood to represent the Tree of Life. I peruse my surroundings: four decorative metal panels occupy the corners of the cube. A staff member tells me these depict scenes from a Norse myth in which two ravens set off each day to fly around the world, returning each evening to share newfound knowledge with their God, Odin.

While the theme's decor is subtle, the message is not; onboard enrichment is a

Return of the
'Grand Tour'

Life on and off Viking Sky proves a tonic for body, mind and soul, writes **Kate Armstrong**.

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Viking principle. I vow to work on my memory bank.

It's a thrill to be driven through the cypress-covered hills of Tuscany on our way to Florence, the paragon of the Renaissance. Our 20-minute slot at The Accademia Gallery allows a brief commune with Michelangelo's statue of David. Ongoing overexposure to the world's most famous statue doesn't diminish its impact (the crowds are another matter). But I'm also fascinated by the surrounding group of statues, or *Prigioni*. They reveal how Michelangelo could envision a figure before he even started carving into the Carrara marble, likening the process to freeing a prisoner from incarceration.

From here it's a crash course in Florentine highlights: the Uffizi, the Palazzo Vecchio, and the Ponte Vecchio that spans the River Arno. And finally, the splendid trio of cathedrals – Giotto's Campanile, Brunelleschi's Duomo, and the Baptistery of San Giovanni with Ghiberti's bronze Gates of Paradise.

Exit Italy, enter the waters of France! En route, I attend a lecture on French

seaports by American historian Elizabeth Griffith. She regales us with tales of Barbary Coast pirates (ruthless), the slave trade (shocking), and the galleys where, in addition to captured slaves, many French criminals and Huguenots were destined for miserable – and short – lives.

A loud bang welcomes us to Nice, which turns out to be from a cannon that's fired every day at noon. The tradition stems from 1861 when Sir Thomas Coventry-More, a retired Scottish military man, would summon home his tardy (if unfortunate) wife for lunch. More enticing are the city's traditional flower markets, which inspired 19th- and 20th-century artists including Matisse, Chagall and Picasso.

But the highlight is the Musée Matisse, which traces the artist's evolution from still life paintings of fruits to Fauvist portraits of women and vibrant "drawings with scissors" – the paper cut-outs that characterised his last decade of life.

It's a short hop by sea from Nice to Marseille, where we wander along the old quay, an ancient trading port lined with yachts. It was this slightly gritty city that inspired the nickname of the country's anthem, *La Marseillaise* – French army captain Claude-Joseph Rouget de Lisle wrote the lyrics in 1792, and it was sung by soldiers who marched from Marseille to Paris during the French Revolution.

A mistral wind blasts across the water, compelling us to shelter in a port-side bar



Clockwise from left: Sète is known as the Venice of the Languedoc; Brunelleschi's Duomo has awed visitors to Florence through the ages; Grand Tourists admiring Greek ruins in the 1750s. PHOTOS: GETTY

and do as our fellow occupants – toss back glasses of pastis. They're expert at this, which is no surprise as the country's much-loved tippie originated here.

The next morning, we disembark at Sète, a picturesque port city that spans a strip of land between the Mediterranean and a large saltwater lagoon. As our guide leads us along the banks of the Canal du Midi, we squint at its reflection in blissful sunshine. The 240-kilometre-long channel runs between Toulouse and Sète, having been commissioned by King Louis XIV and built between 1666 and 1681.

It's another story at Barcelona's Basilica de la Sagrada Família, the masterpiece of surrealist artist Antoni Gaudi, who devoted his life to a project he knew he would never finish. Although construction began in 1882, it's still under way today. Our guide Laura says that when anything takes a while, such as heating up a pot of soup, locals say "it's taking longer than la Sagrada Família".

The sandstone and granite spires of this extraordinary basilica are punctuated with fantastical figures, bunches of grapes, and sheaves of wheat. The last time I was standing before this towering edifice, the spires had not yet been completed.

It is inspiring to witness a masterpiece in the making. As Laura puts it, "I feel privileged to observe this project, something that is changing. We are always witness to something new."

It strikes me that I'll have to return in the future to review la Sagrada's progress – and my own. Now that's a grand idea. **✎**