

TRAVEL

Sunflowers and salvation: Spending time inside the asylum that treated Van Gogh

MAURA MCROBBIE

ARLES is a busy place. There's a hustle and bustle in between the heady fragrant waves of jasmine coming from the covered walls and terracotta urns. The cafes and squares are filled with people of all ages and nationalities and all roads seem to lead to the magnificent Roman arena and amphitheatre that dominate the city's skyline in the heart of Provence.

Arles is classified as a UNESCO world heritage site and it's a real mixture of old and new. The remains of the colossal Roman columns at the gateway to the city, lie directly opposite a massive Monoprix, a major French chain. Indeed, it's quite a confusing place with so many mixed messages that you almost forget why you've come. Is it perhaps just an allusion that the ever-popular world-famed artist, Vincent Van Gogh, lived here?

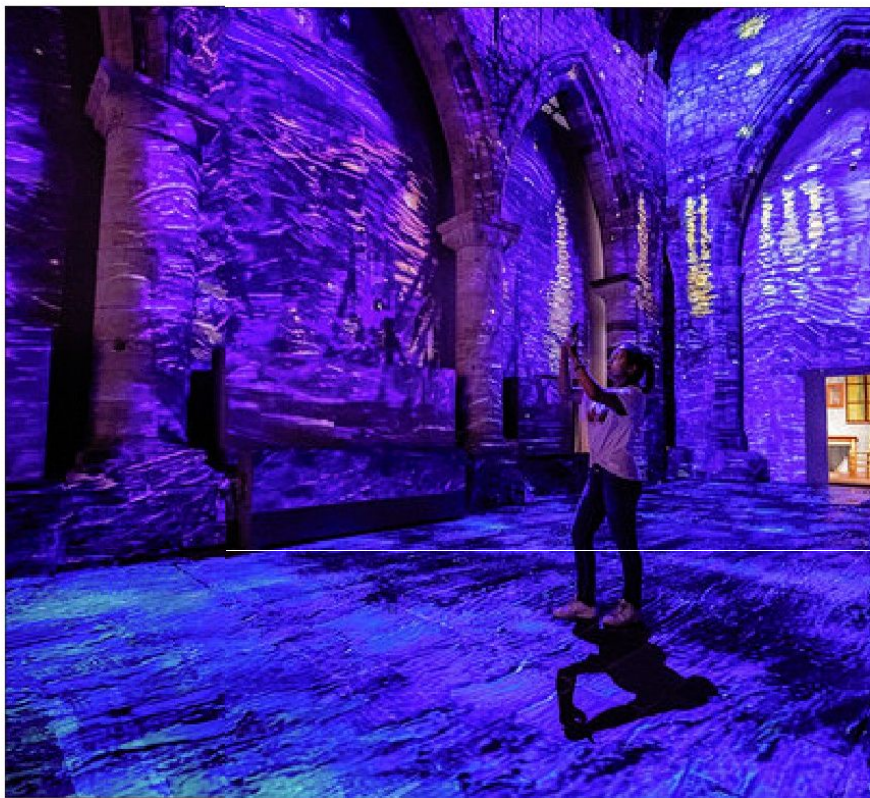
There is no doubt Van Gogh in the 21st century is Big Business. Since Don Maclean's song Vincent touched hearts in 1972, to a painting selling for almost £100 million in 2022, there is no limit to the international fascination for the Dutch artist who suffered tragedy and trauma in his short life, and who died deeply in despair. So deep is the fascination for his life's work, that Glasgow's SEC has extended its run of the Immersive Experience, Beyond Van Gogh, by 3 weeks this summer.

As well as personal letters to his brother Theo, the heart of the exhibition is the immersion chamber where his *Starry Night* themed images are projected onto the walls and floors. If Van Gogh is the star of the show, it's his starry night canvases that pull in the crowds.

It's no surprise then that in Arles, for the first time in 136 years, the *Starry Night* Over the Rhône painting has been returned to where it was originally painted. It is the star attraction at the Vincent Van Gogh Foundation and is on short loan from the Musée d'Orsay in Paris to celebrate the 10th Anniversary of the Foundation.

It's fascinating to see the painting in its original 19th century frame in the gallery's modern setting. The bright yellow stars shine out brilliantly from the cobalt blue sky, like miniature suns or sunflowers. Each star corresponds to a yellow lamplight below illuminating the Rhône walkway, reflecting over the water through horizontal brush strokes. And in the foreground a couple walk along the riverbank, their gestures affectionate, neither young nor old, but happy.

It's a thoughtfully composed piece, striking in its use of colour and exaggeration of the dazzling radiance of the stars and lamplights. It's exhibited amongst an array



of astronomy themed art and although awe-inspiring, Van Gogh's painting would have been more impactful if set alongside more of Van Gogh's *Starry Night* themed paintings.

There are however some interesting pieces on the Cosmos: A 19th century astronomer from Ireland, Lord Ross who, before photography was invented, began drawing what he saw from his telescope. Using white chalk on black paper his small astral-like sketches are simple, and yet it is from these that it is thought Van Gogh refined his ideas as stars as spirals.

Victor Hugo, well known as a writer in Van Gogh's time, was also a keen astronomer, and a coffee-stained watercolour painted by Hugo is also on display. Moving towards the 20th century, there is a 'spiral' room with a stark Kandinsky abstract and an 'eternity' room with beige astral interpretations. The most striking piece of modern art was a blown-up image of a frothy coffee cup with swirls juxtaposed against a telescopic image

Beyond Van Gogh: An Immersive Experience is at the SEC until Monday, August 26

of a space star spiral. The resemblance was unbelievable. It was also good to see that the astral exhibition had included a television screen with some phenomenal Hubble images. I suspect a 21st century Vincent would have been a fan.

However, less than 20 miles away, St Paul's Monastery, in St Remy de Provence, captures the real essence of Van Gogh's work. It was, and still is an asylum that has been supporting those with mental health issues for more than 1000 years.

As you enter the tree lined avenue, visitors are requested to be respectful of patients you may encounter. There is a caring, discreet atmosphere and in between the botanical collection of referenced trees and plants, there are large reproductions of Van Gogh's main paintings completed during his year's incarceration here in 1889. Each is labelled, down to the month it was painted. Instantly this place conveys a timeless serene quality far from the distractions of Arles.

It's simply nature, the seasons and the



stars. Therapy for the crazy mind. A bronze sculpture of Van Gogh in the grounds is a reminder that Vincent was only 36 years old when he stayed here, and yet it has the look and feel of an old man in his 90s. Visitors place sunflowers here in his arms.

And in the monastery, next to the Romanesque chapel, is a visitor's museum that has been faithfully reconstructed in the style of the 1880s when Van Gogh was a patient here. The dining room, the dormitories, the linen corridor with individually initialled gowns, Dr Peyron's room (the psychiatrist who treated him), and a 19th century pharmacy have all been recreated by the French producer and actress Juliette Binoche.

The Mother Superior's office and bedroom are all preserved, along with Van Gogh's bedroom with the famous window overlooking the lavender and wheat fields, olive groves and skies that inspired more than 14 paintings. It's a touching, moving experience. Here everything is ordered and nurtured. Things cannot go wrong, and it is here that Vincent's creativity peaked. More than 150 oil paintings and 100 drawings were completed at St Paul's in just over a year.

In the silence of the cloistered gardens and outside in the walled garden, it is easy to contemplate why this extraordinary place had such an impact on the 35-year-old Vincent. It's a truly immersive experience that leaves you with less of a fear of the asylum, but more in awe of its restorative value. It is here you can truly feel the spirit of Van Gogh, who lived with one foot on earth, and the other in the stars.

Travel notes

Starry Night Exhibition
Arles until September
8. Tickets at fondation-vincentvangogh-arles.org

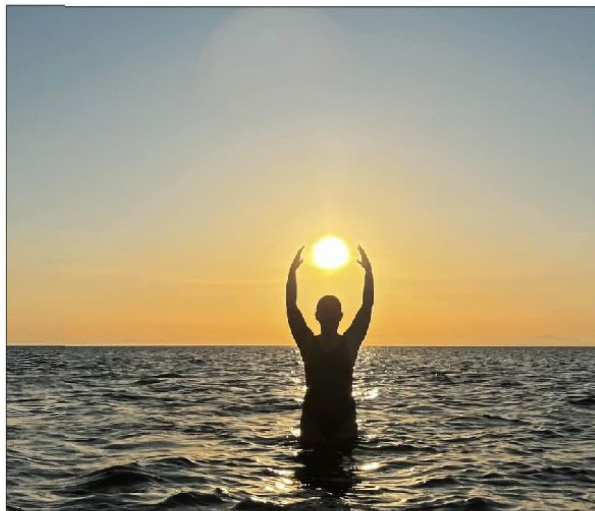
St Paul's Monastery, St
Remy de Provence:
Saint Paul de Mausole
Suggested Stay in St
Remy de Provence:
Mas St Joseph. Tickets
at www.saintpauldemausole.fr

Glasgow SEC: Beyond
Van Gogh until August
26. Tickets at www.beyondvangogh.co.uk/glasgow

Flights: Ryanair:
Edinburgh to
Marseilles – Four
flights a week until end
of October
Easyjet: Edinburgh to
Marseilles – Two
flights a week until end
August

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MY FAVOURITE PLACE



NEVER MIND SCOTLAND'S CASTLES, CULTURE OR FESTIVALS – I COME HERE FOR THIS BEACH

MY FAVOURITE PLACE BY ROB STARR, AUTHOR AND TRIATHLETE

Where is it?

Gullane Beach in East Lothian. When I think about Scotland, or indeed anywhere else I visit, the first things that pop into my head are always the experiences that have had an impact on me, rather than the specific places themselves.

As I have travelled to Scotland so many times I could talk all day about the castles, the culture, the festivals, the food, the people – the list is endless. But the one place that seems to keep jumping into my mind is this beach, 2½ miles from Edinburgh.

Why do you go there?

To swim, to bike and then to run. Gullane Beach has what is probably one of the most scenic triathlon races in Britain. As someone who has been doing triathlons for almost 25 years, I simply had to give it a go.

After my first one, I found myself coming back for more.

I have now completed three triathlons there.

As it's so close to Edinburgh, it means I can bring my family for a short break, leave them to enjoy the fantastic city while I do my crazy thing, then join them again afterwards.

How often do you go?

Sadly, we only get to Scotland once or twice a year. But we do try to go whenever we can.

How did you discover it?

I discovered East Lothian because of the triathlon. It is well-known for being a must-do course.

What's your favourite memory?

In 2022, I did 52 Olympic distance triathlons in the year, basically one a week. The majority of them were just about getting it done, ticking that box.

But the Gullane Beach Triathlon was so much more for me. It was about enjoying the beautiful scenery and not even caring about the time it took.

Who do you take?

Scotland is always about family time. There are five of us, so it's always a "Five Starr" trip.

What do you take?

For the triathlon day, it's all about the bike and the kit. But when I join the family for the Edinburgh part of the trip, I need nothing but Sharon, Asher, Mia and Jesse (and the credit card, of course).

What do you leave behind?

I hope nothing more than a lot of smiles and laughs.

Sum it up in five words.

Scenic. Friendly. Challenging. Invigorating. Glorious.

What other travel spot is on your wish list?

Anywhere for wild swimming. Loch Lomond for sure. I love open water swimming and this loch is firmly on my bucket list. And I've got a picture of Castle Stalker on my wall at home – I have to go there.

The First Widow by Rob Starr (£9.99), is published on August 29

SUSAN SWARBRICK