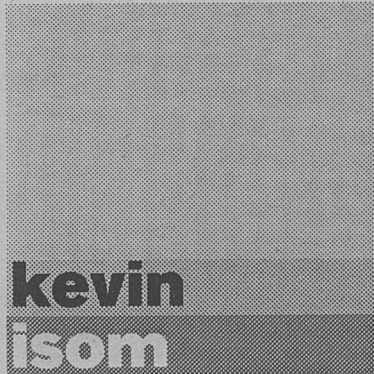


Tongue in Cheek: Trolling Through the Gay Southwest of France

It's cold outside. It's gray. And the memory of Janet Jackson's ample white mammary is still etched in my mind. It's time to think pleasanter thoughts. Thoughts of pleasanter places – and places with people with browner skin – like the gay Southwest of France.

Whenever gay folks in the U.S. think of gay France, we naturally think of Paris – the center of the French gay universe. Why, Paris even comes complete with a gay mayor. So why would you ever want to go, as the French would say, “into the provinces?” Ever the contrarian, I had to answer that question by going myself.

I took a high-speed train from Paris into the center of the city of Montpellier. Montpellier is not so much a city as an excuse for large numbers of gorgeous people to stroll around in limited clothing. Literally. Montpellier is a big university town, so there is a high concentration of young peo-



called Rue des Tessiers. And the city has been named as the second favorite city of gays in a national survey. After my sixth Perrier as I watch the pretty people go by, I'm not surprised.

Not far from Montpellier are the beaches of L'Espiguette. The sand is brown, and so are many of the bottoms and breasts exposed. There is a regular beach section (where even so, many French women go topless), then a nude straight section, and finally a nude gay section of the beach. Warning: Most French men are

wine are a heady combination.

Not far from Avignon is the charming medieval-walled city of Arles, home to Roman ruins, including the famed amphitheater, the arena (where bull fights still entertain the masses), the forum, and the fabulous mosaics contained in the museum of antiquities. Arles was also home, for a time, to Vincent Van Gogh, who painted many scenes in Arles, and many of those scenes are conveniently noted for you by the city with special markers.

Near Arles is the even smaller town of St. Remy de Provence, home to Nostradamus and, for a somewhat shorter time, to Van Gogh, who stayed at the sanitarium just outside of St. Remy. The sanitarium is now a museum dedicated to Van Gogh, and it's just next door to the ruins of the Roman city of Glanum. Mountains, ruins, all the vistas that Van Gogh saw and painted who could ask for more? How about the fabulous and gay-welcoming hotel Les Ateliers de l'Image, a lovely villa-esque hotel with a view over the glass-smooth pool toward the mountains that makes you feel like Madonna would envy you for staying there. You can walk through the town of St. Remy and gorge on candied fruit, then have a glass of wine by the pool under the stars.

Visiting the Southwest of France is like visiting another world, where the worries of American day-to-day life fade into oblivion.

At the very least, I made you forget all about Janet's breast, didn't I? ▼

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ple. They all seem to have a sun-kissed brown skin, and their preference seems to be to show as much of it as possible, all the while being as chic as Frenchness demands. They even smile a lot, which is very unusual for the French. (I'm KIDDING. That was a play on a cultural stereotype.)

Sitting in a café in front of the grand and lovely Montpellier Opera House, you could observe for hours, as you downed sparkling water after sparkling water, just to keep from overheating. (This can easily push those thoughts of Janet Jackson right out of your mind.)

Montpellier has a number of gay and lesbian bars and restaurants, many of which are tucked away in a charming street

uncircumcised. This can come as a shock to an American. It is also a useful introductory line: “I've never seen one of those before. May I touch it?” (I'm KIDDING. That was a play on another kind of cultural stereotype.) There is even another section of the beach where you can rent horses to ride through the spray. This is sort of an every-fantasy-you've-ever-had-it's-time-to-live-it area.

Edging further east are the smaller historical cities of Avignon, Arles, and St. Remy de Provence. Avignon is known, of course, for the Papal Palace, a medieval fortress from the time when the Popes relocated from Rome to France. Avignon holds an annual festival of theater and is surrounded by vineyards. Arts and

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