

weekend to remember

Vincent's brush with happiness

Misery and madness dominated much of Van Gogh's life, but he found beauty in a village near Paris, writes **Rodney Bolt**

Vincent van Gogh died not in Arles, as many people think, but in the village of Auvers-sur-Oise, just north of Paris. He had been there for 70 days and had painted 70 canvases. Fraught, exhausted, destitute, he shot himself in the chest on July 27, 1890.

In this last frenzied spurt of life, despite the "sadness and extreme loneliness" that gnawed at him, he was moved by the colour and beauty of early-summer Auvers. He painted gardens and chestnut blossom, wheat fields and rural lanes. When he portrayed the local chateau and the village church, he charged his palette with violets and blues, oranges and yellows. They were canvases, he wrote to his brother, Theo, that expressed what he could not say in words: how "healthy and invigorating" he found the Auvers countryside.

Yet we hardly ever hear of Auvers – it's the drama of the south, of the Yellow House, of violent arguments with Gauguin, of prostitutes, madness and self-mutilation that grips the public imagination. What was it about Auvers that seemed almost to give Vincent the peace of mind he longed for, and yet fell short?

Van Gogh chose Auvers because his friend Dr Gachet had a house there, and because it was "far enough from Paris to be the real country". Today, at its edges, the village brushes the metropolitan sprawl, but at its heart it seems hardly to have changed. There are still buildings and vistas instantly recognisable from Van Gogh's paintings. Wheat fields still stretch beyond the church. From our dormer window at the Hostellerie du Nord, the former post inn, we looked out on the squat Gothic tower of Van Gogh's *Church at Auvers*. We wandered up the lane to view the building from the same angle as he had painted it.

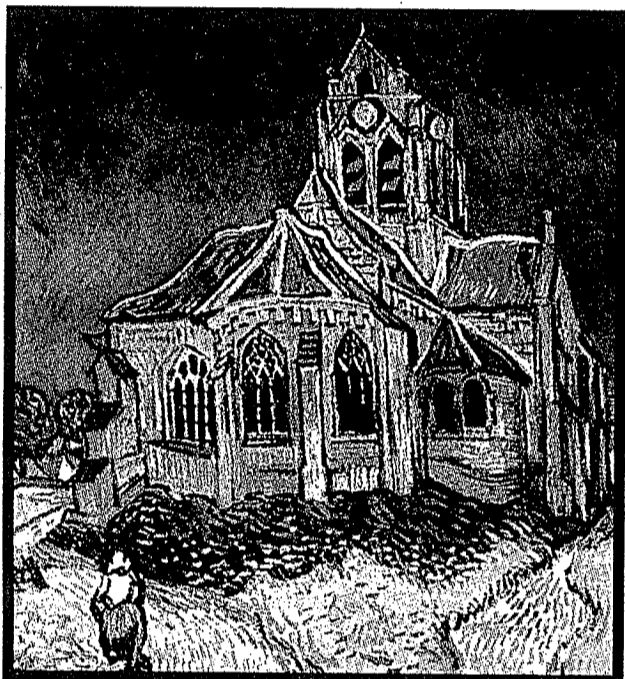
There we found a reproduction of his work. Because so little in the real scene had altered, the painting gave a beguiling glimpse of how Van Gogh was responding to the world around him. His church seems to loom and block the path, its perspectives disturb, its colours are startling. And yet, in the setting sun, the

stone church at Auvers seemed almost to take on the blue and mauve hues with which he had endowed it.

We walked on through rows of old stone houses and walled gardens, here and there an ancient, gnarled branch pushing through a wall, bursting with blossom; a Madonna in a grotto, or a deep, quiet well. Then we idled along the towpath beside the Oise, past an odd mixture of grand villas and tumbledown cottages.

Auvers is a snaking village, squeezed between the river and the ridge of the Vexin plateau. Having cliffs and water almost within touching distance on either side heightens its air of detachment. By late afternoon the day trippers have gone, leaving it in repose, and you can understand why the painter came here to escape the disruptions of Paris. And not only Van Gogh – the artist Daubigny lived here for many years, Corot and Daumier came to visit, Cézanne stayed on for a year-and-a-half, and painters have been living and working here ever since.

On Saturday morning we walked down to the town hall, another Van Gogh subject, and across the way to Auberge Ravoux, where the painter had his lodgings, and where he died. Until the 1980s, the auberge was pretty much ignored by the outside world, drawing just a trickle of dedicated visitors. Since then it's been transformed by maverick visionary Dominique Janssens, who has restored the inn downstairs and preserved the upstairs rooms where Vincent and fellow painters stayed. After Van Gogh's death, his room was left pretty much intact – a



DOUBLE VISION Much of Auvers has hardly changed since Van Gogh's day, which means that many of its vistas and buildings, such as the church, are in

suicide's room was considered unlucky, and was difficult to let.

The room is bare. A blank canvas on to which visitors can project their own reactions. There's a single, tiny attic window. The walls are unpainted. You can see the rows of holes made by the nails Vincent used to hang up paintings to dry.

From the auberge, we followed the road that Vincent so often took, to the house of his friend, the homeopath and art patron Dr Paul Gachet. It was he who encouraged Van Gogh not only to come to Auvers, but to keep painting, as a form of therapy. It almost worked. Van Gogh was taken by the beauty of the place, but it was not enough. "I try to be cheerful," he wrote, "but my

life is threatened at the root, and my steps are wavering."

This year Gachet's house was opened to the public, also under Janssens' careful stewardship. Again, it remains very much as the doctor left it – his son lived a hermit-like existence there, refusing even running water, into the 1960s. The house is presented stripped of fussy museum clutter – just a few wall projections, a print made by Vincent in Gachet's upstairs studio, the garden table where the doctor's artist friends lunched, and at which Vincent painted his portrait. In the garden we peeked in at the old outside loo, complete with the original stone seat that had received the buttocks of Cézanne, Pissarro, Renoir and many more.

Later that afternoon we dropped in on the 17th-century Château d'Auvers, where one glimpse of people walking around with infra-red headsets, off to board an indoor railway carriage that would take them past Ile de France landscapes, and preparing for a 3D film of *Van Gogh's Last Days*, sent us scurrying back down the hill, aware of the fate that might have befallen the room where he died.

That night we ate at the auberge. It was crowded with local families, the odd couple from Paris, people from neighbouring towns. Word has got out about the cooking – dishes from the recipe book of the original patron, Arthur Ravoux, and other authentic 19th-century sources: superb

marinated herring and salmon, "seven-hour lamb" that had been simmering all day, a chocolate mousse to bring tears to your eyes – terrines, pots and bowls all brought from kitchen to table, containing more than you could eat.

Early on Sunday morning, we walked up to the cemetery on the outskirts of the village where Vincent and his brother, Theo, are buried, side by side, their graves intertwined with ivy brought from Dr Gachet's garden. The leaves bore a rather macabre dust – many people ask for their ashes to be strewn on the graves. A note among the foliage read "Dear Vincent, I pray you are happy now". And there were others, some mawkish, a few surreal.

We left the graveyard, and walked out through the clear air of the wheat fields. The skies were cloudless, the sun was warm, and crows rose from the corn. We might have been peasants passing through a Van Gogh landscape – except that the weather he describes to Theo is more ominous. "They are vast stretches of corn under troubled skies," he wrote, "and I did not have to go out of my way very much to express sadness, extreme loneliness".

The paintings of the wheat fields were among his last.

essentials

Getting there

Eurostar (08705 186186; www.eurostar.com) runs daily services from London and Ashford to Paris from £59 return. Take a suburban train from Gare St Lazare or Gare du Nord (the Eurostar terminus) to Pontoise, and change for Auvers-sur-Oise.

Staying there

Hostellerie du Nord, 6 rue du

Général du Gaulle (0033 1 3036 7074; www.hostellerie-dunord.fr); doubles from £69. La Ramure, 38 rue du Montcel, (1 3036 7932) offers b & b from £42.

Further Information

Auberge Ravoux "Maison Van Gogh", Place de la Mairie (1 3036 6060); Maison Gachet, rue du Docteur Gachet (1 3029 5100).



What it cost for two

Eurostar from London to Paris	£118
Train Paris to Auvers	£12.50
Two nights' b & b	£142
Dinner at Auberge Ravoux	£66.50
Entrance to Maison Van Gogh	£7
Entrance to Maison Gachet	£5.50
Total	£351.50