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Landscape of a tortured genius

Paul Betts tours Auvers-sur-Oise, where Vincent van Gogh painted his final works before taking his own life

France is full of picturesque places associated with well-known artists. Within striking distance of Paris there is the painters' village of Barbizon, 'home' of Jean-Francois Millet. Then there is Giverny, with Claude Monet's lovely house and chocolate-box garden and lily pond. The old fishing port of Honfleur on the Calvados coast has an intimate connection with Eugene Boudin. Provence and the Mediterranean Riviera, in the south, with their remarkable light, have long been an magnet for artists.

Yet there is one village only 20 miles to the north-west of Paris that is not particularly pretty but delivers an unexpectedly strong emotional charge that can be unsettling and cathartic.

This is because Auvers-sur-Oise is synonymous with the tortured artistic genius of Vincent van Gogh, who spent the last 70 days of his tragic life there and is buried next to his brother Theo in the most humble of

graves in the village's little cemetery.

Those last 70 days were incredibly productive. Van Gogh produced 75 canvases, numerous drawings and studies and engraved his only etching. He drifted here after a spell in an asylum in May 1890, in search of a haven to

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escape his solitude. He found lodgings in a small inn, the Auberge Ravoux, in the centre of the village and was put in the care of Dr Paul Gachet, an amateur painter and engraver and a friend and collector of the impressionists.

Van Gogh would often

work and meet other artists at the nearby home of the widow of the landscape painter Charles Daubigny, who had been a father figure to the new generation of impressionists. Camille Pissarro, Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot and Paul Cézanne all spent time at Auvers.

Rather than finding inner peace, Van Gogh, one late day in July 1890, went out and shot himself in the stomach. He later died in his tiny attic room in the Auberge Ravoux and the room, for superstition, was never rented out again. Today it is a place of pilgrimage.

The place has since been sensitively restored by an enlightened Belgian - Dominique-Charles Janssens. He bought the inn in 1987 on an impulse after visiting the village by chance. He has made it a life's work of creating a private foundation called the Institut Van Gogh.

The restoration of the inn took seven years to complete. The old café now looks

exactly as it must have looked when van Gogh lived there. It serves good regional fare - the sort of dishes van Gogh must have eaten. In the attic, the room where he died is as it was. There is one difference: there is a large section of wall prepared with a

glass, bullet-proof, high security casing ready to accommodate a van Gogh canvas.

For Janssens, bringing back one of the artist's canvases to his last home would complete his task. Yet promises from the Musee d'Orsay in Paris to lend one of its

van Gogh's painted during the artist's final period in Auvers have so far not been kept. The French public sector remains somewhat aloof to private foundations.

Janssens' institute can of course try to buy a painting. Indeed it is considering

doing so but the cost of a van Gogh, as everybody knows, is astronomical. A portrait of Gachet fetched the highest price ever paid at the time for a painting at an auction in 1987.

It would be particularly fitting if van Gogh's painting of Daubigny's lush garden returned to the Auberge Ravoux. This was probably his last work before his suicide, although many wrongly believe it is the famous landscape of wheat fields because of its turbulent style and the symbolic presence of crows suggesting death. The wheat fields are just by the cemetery where van Gogh is buried and up a small road from the church of Auvers, another of his most famous subjects.

With 100,000 pilgrims from around the world now visiting Auvers each year, the village has gone to great trouble to guide visitors on a walking tour of the places associated with van Gogh and his paintings, as well as

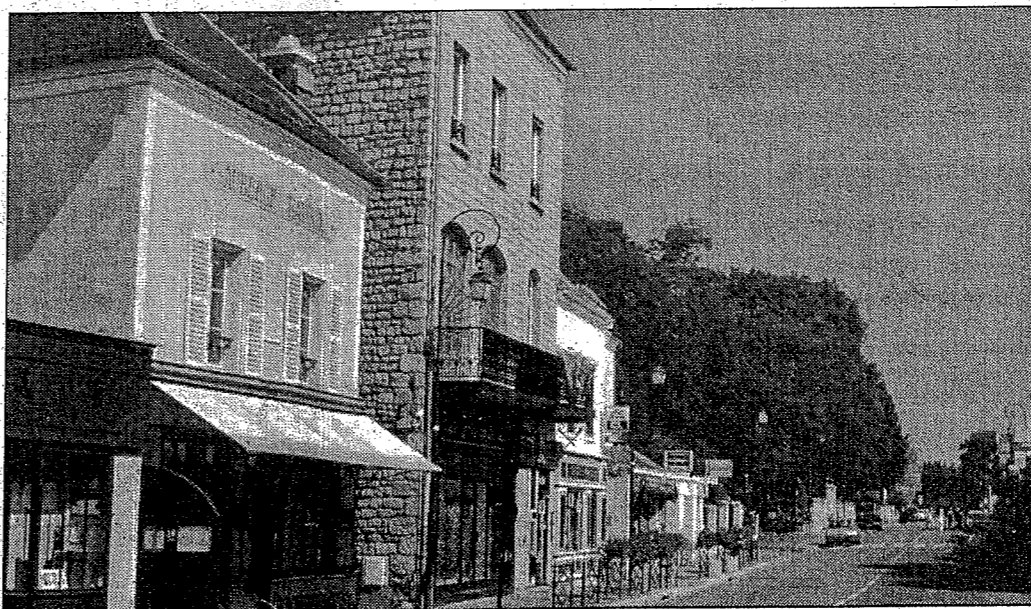
the other artists who came and worked here.

Apart from the inn, you can visit Daubigny's house, the restored chateau with its multimedia painting exhibition, Gachet's house, the church, cemetery and other spots captured by its famous artists in the immediate countryside.

There is also a small museum devoted to absinthe, the popular drink of penniless artists - including Van Gogh - that turned into a poison that accelerated the death wishes of some.

What makes the day trip to Auvers so special in spite of having to drive through Paris's depressing suburbia is that little attic room where van Gogh died. It is so dingy, so tragic, so poignant a shrine that it leaves you slightly drunk at the thought of finally beginning to understand the inner torment of an extraordinary artist.

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Artistic pilgrimage: the Auberge Ravoux, where van Gogh spent his final days

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