

It is easy to see why Auvers-sur-Oise calls itself The Village of Artists. The subway in the railway station is filled with artwork, and there's an ongoing art exhibition by local talent in the waiting room. An artist's studio lies a stone's throw from the station premises, and later in the evening, a jazz band is to perform, where else, but at a local art gallery.

Although there are guided tours and a mobile app to make our visit more informative, we decide to simply wander by ourselves and get blissfully lost in the little French village that is less than 13 sq km in size. Even on a grey morning like this, Auvers works its picturesque charm on us—winding streets are lined with stone cottages, their window-boxes brimming with flowers while white lace curtains flap gently behind window panes with shutters painted sage green or slate.

FINDING VINCENT

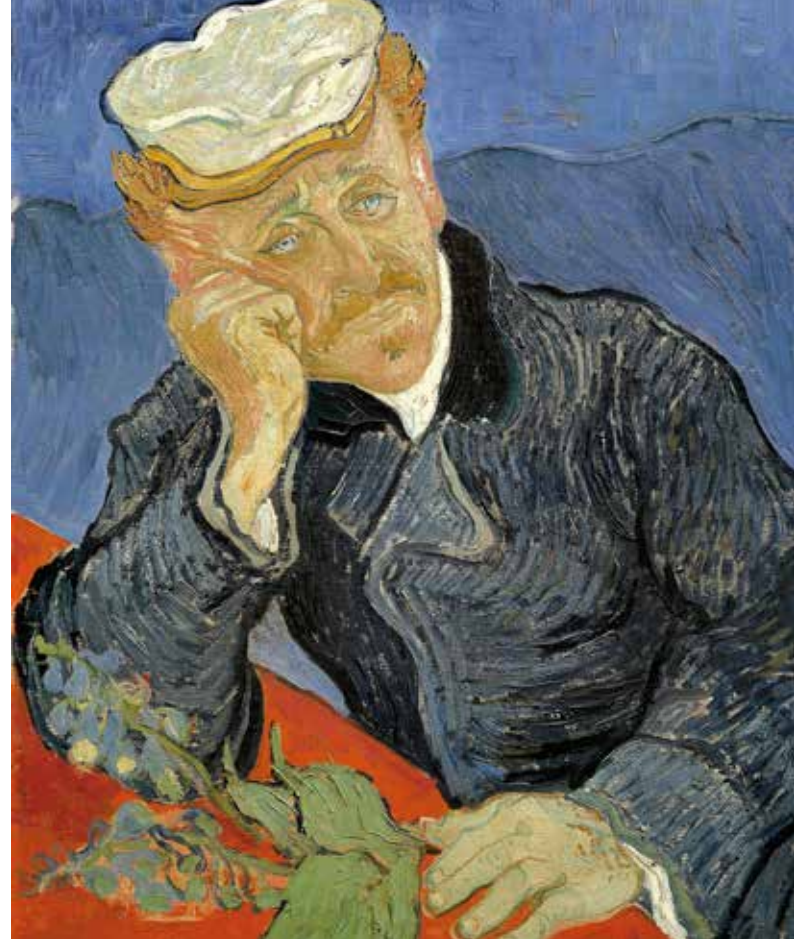
THE FRENCH VILLAGE OF AUVERS-SUR-OISE IS A CRITICAL LINK TO THE LAST DAYS OF VINCENT VAN GOGH. SARITHA RAO RAYACHOTI JOURNEYS THROUGH THE LANDSCAPE THAT INSPIRED SOME OF THE DUTCH POST-IMPRESSIONIST'S MOST ICONIC WORKS.

But Auvers' association with art runs far deeper. The landscapes of Auvers and the Oise valley inspired the work of artists such as Pissarro, Daubigny and Cézanne who lived here in the 1800s. And for admirers of the Dutch Post-Impressionist, Vincent van Gogh, a visit to Auvers-sur-Oise comes close to a pilgrimage.

The Artist in Room No 5

Vincent van Gogh (1853–1890) arrived at Auvers in May 1890, entrusting himself to the care of Dr Gachet, a physician and something of an artist himself. The mental instability that had hounded van Gogh over the years seemed to subside briefly, and in the 70 days he lived here, he is said to have averaged a painting a day, including 'Portrait of Dr Gachet', 'Church at Auvers' and 'Wheatfield with Crows'. On July 27, 1890, van Gogh stumbled back to his room at the Auberge Ravoux with a self-inflicted gunshot wound in the chest. He died two days later having sold only a small fraction of the 900 glorious paintings that we know of today.

➤ Facing page (clockwise from top left): The cemetery at Auvers-sur-Oise serves as van Gogh's final resting place; Gogh's physician was the subject of 'Portrait of Dr Gachet'; The village church immortalised in 'Church at Auvers'. Also pictured is an informative panel, one of many that have been installed at several sites that inspired Gogh's paintings; During his lifetime, van Gogh painted about 43 self-portraits.





The Auberge Ravoux (now also known as the House of van Gogh) has been painstakingly restored to showcase life in the late 1800s. There is a restaurant on the ground floor, and the upper floor has been converted into a compact museum called La Maison van Gogh. The Institut van Gogh, in partnership with the Auberge Ravoux, hopes to one day, fulfil the artist's wish of having an exhibition of his own by returning one of his Auvers paintings to the 7-sq m-room he occupied, thus rendering it the smallest museum in the world. Vincent's compact attic room is stark, with a chair placed under the skylight. We get a better idea of what it must have looked like with furniture in a neighbouring room of identical proportions that has been arranged with a cot, desk, chair and wash table. It is a humble space with barely any room to store canvases.

The church and the fields beyond

A few years ago, nothing prepared me for the sight of the original 'Church at Auvers' that hangs in the Musée D'Orsay in Paris. I loved the graceful slant of the roof juxtaposed against the deep blue sky, and the numerous individual brush strokes brought the piece alive like no reproduction could ever aspire to. Here, at Auvers, stands the very church that inspired this painting. Van Gogh's depiction of the church is accurate, I find, only

the dramatic blue sky is missing today. The use of a human figure in the foreground indicates scale. While the church holds many stories of its own, I am eager to press on—the wheat fields, lying under expansive skies, that dominate so many of van Gogh's paintings at Auvers are just around the corner.

« The hues may not be as intense as he had painted them, but the landscape and the village are remarkably unchanged »

"I myself am quite absorbed in that immense plain, with wheat fields up as far as the hills, boundless as the ocean, delicate yellow, delicate soft green, the delicate purple of a tilled and weeded piece of ground, with the regular speckle of the green of flowering potato plants, everything under a sky of delicate tones of blue, white, pink and violet. I am in a mood of almost too much calm, just the mood needed for painting this," says van Gogh of Auvers' landscape in a letter to his mother and sister, written in his native Dutch.

The fields, however, look nothing like the golden wheat of van Gogh's paintings, and on closer observation, they turn out to be pods of mustard drying on stalks. Only the red poppies are aflame, just as van Gogh had

▲ **Top: A study of van Gogh's many self-portraits by students from a local school.**

➤ **Facing page (left to right): The quaint old stone houses and unpaved pathways of Auvers-sur-Oise have remained almost unchanged since van Gogh's time; A view of Room 5, where Vincent van Gogh stayed at the Auberge Ravoux.**



Saritha Rao Ravachoti



Joe Cornish/Courtesy Institut Van Gogh

portrayed them. Across Auvers, there are panels with images of the artist's paintings installed near the view they depict. While comparing one such panel, we acknowledge that the colours of the landscape as seen through van Gogh's mind's eye are far more intense than one sees in nature.

Perhaps today's overcast skies and characterless sunlight are also playing havoc with our perception of colour, making an otherwise vivid landscape appear insipid and lifeless, we conclude. And then we come upon the place where van Gogh painted 'Wheatfield with Crows'. It is here that the sun decides to make up for its late arrival by bearing down on us with great ferocity. For a brief while, the sky turns a brilliant blue. The clouds are buffeted by tinges of violet, and the green in the land begins to glow before a grey haze descends on the landscape.

The brothers van Gogh

Most of what we know about Vincent van Gogh is from his art and his letters, primarily to his brother, Theo, who supported him all his life. When the artist was on his deathbed, Theo rushed to be by his side. Six months after van Gogh's death, Theo too passed away. In a fitting tribute to the bond between the brothers, 24 years later, Theo's remains were brought to be buried beside his brother at the village cemetery at Auvers.

Solemn tourists mill around the graves, each one of us moved by the same thought—in death, as in life, Theo is by his brother's side. On the train ride back to Paris, we realise that this year marks the 125th anniversary of van Gogh's death. The hues may not be as intense as he had painted them, but the landscape and the village are remarkably unchanged. There are no factories or barns that have cropped up in the place of fields, and the church, the old stone houses and unpaved pathways have all been lovingly preserved by the people of Auvers.

I hope to return someday to find Auvers just as idyllic. I hope to return to see a van Gogh painting in Room 5 of the Auberge Ravoux. And I hope that when I do, it'll be a summer's day, and I shall gaze upon van Gogh's palette, "...delicate yellow, delicate soft green, the delicate purple of a tilled and weeded piece of ground, with the regular speckle of the green of flowering potato plants, everything under a sky of delicate tones of blue, white, pink and violet." █

GOOD TO KNOW

Getting there

Auvers-sur-Oise is an hour's train ride from Paris. Take a train from Gare du Nord to Pontoise from where you can board another train travelling towards Persan-Beaumont.

When to go

Maison de van Gogh is open Wed–Sun, 10am–6pm (doors close at 5.30pm).

Tourist information

Free maps can be found at Auvers-sur-Oise station and the Tourist Office (Tue–Sun, 9.30am–6pm) that's located diagonally opposite.
