

Down the Rhône 1: Orange to Beaucaire

Despite Frédéric Mistral's best efforts in the epic 1896 Poème du Rhône, this is not a lyrical river, neither fair of face nor full of grace. Its nickname, 'malabar', the strongman, describes it well: deep and swift-flowing with muscular currents, banks like bulging biceps, and secret depths hosting legendary man-eating monsters such as the Tarasque and Drac.

For the Rhône is a Saturday's child and has to work for a living: after serving the industries and nuclear plants to the north, it does it all again in Provence, at France's biggest centre for the processing of nuclear waste, at the hydroelectric plant and satanic mills of Avignon's industrial quarter, and at the paper mills near Tarascon.



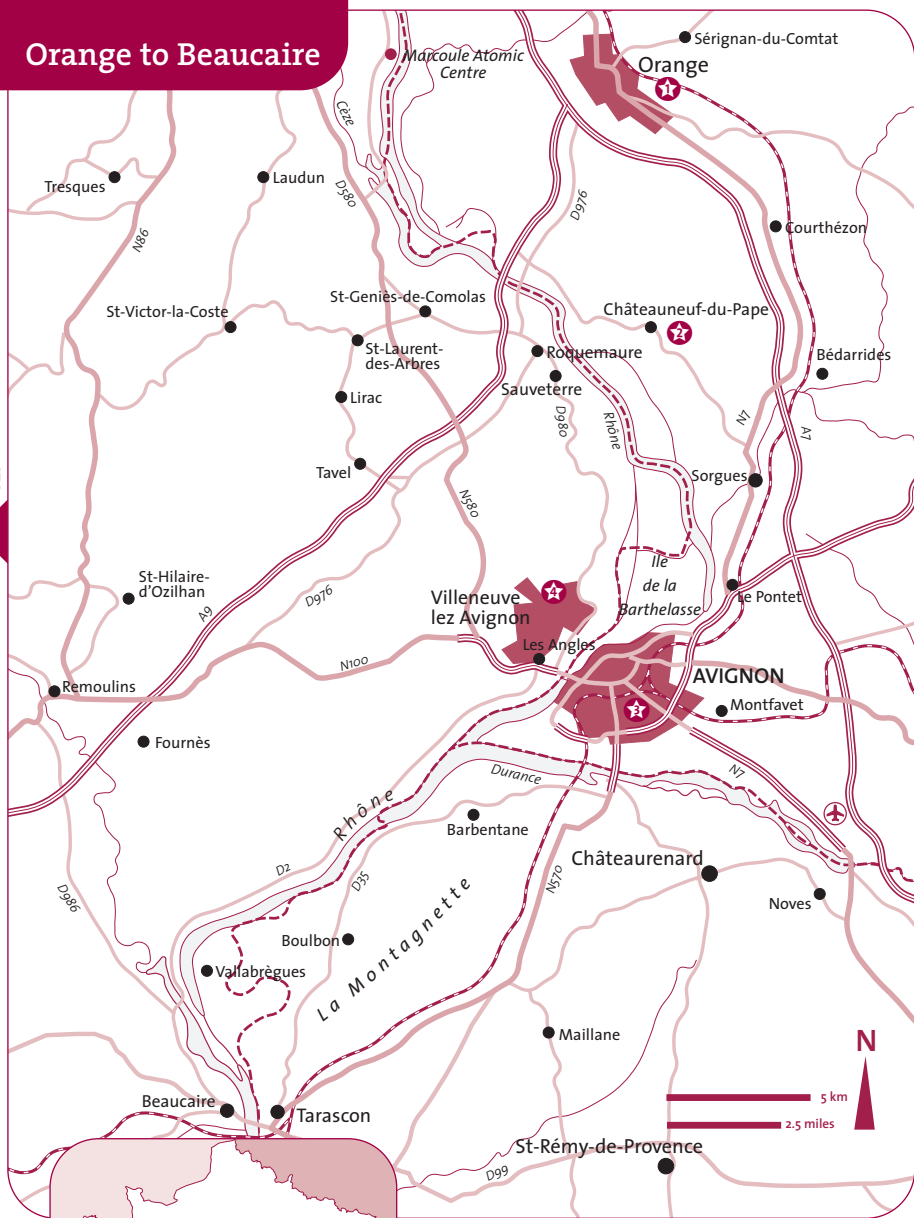
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Don't miss

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- ★ **A lively Babylon that captivated medieval popes**
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Orange to Beaucaire



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Historically, most of the Rhône's traffic has come south with the current, ferrying the blond barbarians, eaters of *frites* and drinkers of beer, down to the sultry Mediterranean. The river also divided the spoils: Provence, situated on the east bank, owed allegiance to the emperor and pope; Languedoc, on the west, belonged to the kingdom of France after the Albigensian Crusade. Rhône boatmen called the banks, not port and starboard, but Empire and Kingdom. On the empire's side are Orange, with its famous Roman theatre; Châteauneuf-du-Pape and Avignon, where 14th-century popes spent what Petrarch called their 'Babylonian exile'; and Tarascon, favoured home of Provence's Bon Roi ('Good King') René.

From Orange to Avignon

Orange



There seems to have been a settlement of some kind around the hill of St-Eutrope in prehistoric times, and the city's chronicles date from 35 BC, giving it enough time for all imaginable Oranges to have come and gone. The present incarnation must be one of the sadder ones – this is a miasmic provincial town with a few cosy corners among the prevailing drabness. Fate, or the lack of a bypass road, has made its streets a kind of Le Mans for heavy lorries, fouling the air, menacing pedestrians and coating the old houses with a sooty film. Nevertheless, there are two ancient monuments unmatched in France, and some surprises besides. You'll probably like it best on a Sunday, when the law bans trucks from the road.

History

Rome took good care of its soldiers; keeping its word by them was one secret of the Empire's success. Nine years after Julius Caesar's death, many veterans of the Second Gallic Legion were ready for their promised retirement. The pattern was already set. Rome would establish a colony for them in the lands that they had conquered, often replacing a native village they had destroyed; the veterans farmed their allocated lands, and could look forward to real wealth in their declining years as the colony grew into a town. The colony that became Orange was called Colonia Julia Secundanorum Arausio. Exceedingly prosperous throughout Roman times, it survived the Visigothic conquest in 412; it was the site of two Church councils in the following decades.

The chronicles are largely blank from then until the mid-12th century, when the city's feudal lord was Raimbaut d'Orange, troubadour and patron of troubadours. Even then, history was on the back burner; the city and its hinterlands were often put in hock

Getting to and around Orange

The **train station**, t 04 90 11 88 03, on Avenue Frédéric Mistral has direct links with Paris, Avignon, Arles, Marseille, Nice and Cannes.

Buses depart from Cours Pourtoles, t 04 90 34 15 59, several times a day for Carpentras, Vaison-la-Romaine, Avignon and Séguret.

Bike Hire

Cycles Dupont, 745 Av Charles de Gaulle, t 04 90 34 15 60.

Cycles Picca, 795 Av de Verdun, t 04 90 51 69 53.

to pay Raimbaut's debts, while he presided over the most brilliant of Provençal courts. He died in 1173, at the age of only 29, and Orange passed to the counts of Baux.

In the 14th century it was a thriving place, with a municipal charter and even a university. In 1530 the city became the property of the German house of Nassau, just in time for the Reformation and the most unusual page of the city's history, an odd chance that would let Orange lend its colour to the Dutch, the Northern Irish, the Orange Free State and Orange, New Jersey. The Nassaus declared for Protestantism, and Orange rapidly became the dissenters' chief stronghold in Provence, a home for thousands of refugees and a thorn in the side of arch-Catholic Avignon, just to the south. Soon after, William of Nassau – William of Orange – became the first *stadhouder* of the United Provinces and led the fight for Dutch independence. Orange held fast through all the troubles of the Wars of Religion, and came out of it a Dutch possession, giving its name to the Netherlands' royal family.

Maurice of Nassau, in the early 17th century, did Orange a bad turn by destroying most of its ancient ruins, using their stone for the new wall he was building against the French. It didn't keep them out for long. In 1672, during one of his wars against the Dutch, Louis XIV seized the city and demolished its wall and castle.

French rule, particularly after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685 (see p.27), was a disaster; Orange, like many other towns in the south, lost many of its best citizens. The city has never really recovered, but it earns a fair living today from industry, and from the army and airforce bases that make it one of the most important military centres in France. Having twice elected a National Front mayor didn't help it either. Although the ultra-right Mayor Bompard claims to have spruced up the town, he also cut off all funds to cultural associations for ethnic minorities and banned a selection of left-wing literature from the public library.

Théâtre Antique

The architects might be distressed to hear it, but these days the most impressive part of this huge structure is its back wall. 'The best wall in my kingdom,' Louis XIV is said to have called it. If the

Théâtre Antique

www.theatre-antique.com; open June–Aug daily 9–7; April, May and Sept daily 9–6; Mar and Oct 9.30–5.30; Jan, Feb, Nov and Dec daily 9.30–4.30; free audioguides; tours t 04 90 11 02 31; adm; ticket also valid for Musée Municipal, see opposite

old prints in the municipal museum are accurate, this rugged, elegant sandstone cliff facing Place des Frères Mounet was originally adorned with low, temple-like façades. In its present state, it resembles a typical Florentine Renaissance palace, minus the windows. The classically minded architects of the 15th century all travelled in Provence, and perhaps this stately relic of Rome at its best had a hidden influence that would have made its architects proud.

Built in the early 1st century AD, the theatre is a testimony to the culture and wealth of Arausio. Like the Colosseum in Rome, it even had a massive awning (*velum*), a contraption of canvas and beams that could be raised to cover most of the 9,000 spectators. All over the Mediterranean, theatres fell into disuse as part of the cultural degradation of the late Empire. This one was probably already abandoned when it burned down in the 4th or 5th century. In the Middle Ages, other buildings grew up over the ruins; old prints show the semicircular tiers of seats (*cavea*) half-filled in and covered with ramshackle houses.

The site is typical for a Roman theatre, backed into the hill of St-Eutrope, where the banks of seats could be built on the slope. These have been almost completely restored. Since 1869, Orange has used the theatre for a summer festival called *Les Chorégies*. Mistral and the Félibres (see pp.41–2) were active in its early years, when Greek and Roman plays were often on the bill; today contemporary drama and opera are more common.

Unlike Greek theatres, which always opened to a grand view behind the stage, those of the Romans featured large stage buildings, serious architectural compositions of columns, arches and sculptured friezes. This is what the great exterior wall is supporting; Orange's stage building (which is 115ft high) is one of two complete specimens that remain to us (the other is at Aspendos in southwestern Turkey), although the fragments of its decoration are mostly in the municipal museum across the street. A statue of Augustus remains, in the centre, over an inscription honouring the people of Arausio and welcoming them to the show. Outside the theatre, the foundations of a temple have been excavated, along with a semicircular ruin that may have been a *nymphaeum* or a gymnasium.

Musée Municipal

Make sure you save some time for this bulging curiosity shop, directly opposite the theatre on Place des Frères Mounet; it is one of the most fascinating town museums in Provence. As expected, the main rooms focus on Roman art, including an exceptional frieze of satyrs and Amazons from the theatre. The *plan cadastral* (land survey) is unique: a stone tablet engraved with property

Musée Municipal

t 04 90 51 17 60; open
April–Sept Mon–Sat
9–7, Sun 9–12 and 2–7;
Oct–Mar Mon–Sat 9–12
and 1.30–5.30

records for the broad Roman grid of farmland between Orange and Montélimar. The first pieces of it were discovered in 1856, though no one guessed what they were until the rest turned up, between 1927 and 1954; since then they have been a great aid to scholars in filling in some of the everyday details of Roman life and law.

Climbing the stairs into the upper levels of the museum, you'll pass rooms of Dutch portraits and relics of Nassau rule, and a collection of works by the Welsh Impressionist Frank Brangwyn (born in Bruges): heroic compositions among wharves and factories, and country scenes. The most unexpected exhibit is the **Salle des Wetter**, a remarkable relic of the Industrial Revolution in France. The Wetters were a family of mid-18th-century industrialists who produced *indiennes*, printed cotton cloth much in demand at the time. They commissioned an artist named G. M. Rossett to paint a record of their business; this he did (1764) in incredible detail, on five huge naïve canvases showing every aspect of the making of *indiennes*, from the stevedores unloading the cotton on the docks to the shy, serious factory girls in the great hall – the Wetters were among the first in France to stumble on the factory system, and employed more than 500 people.

Old Orange and the Triumphal Arch

Touring old Orange does not handsomely reward the visitor. You can walk up the hill of **St-Eutrope** for a view over the town and a look at the foundations of the castle destroyed by the French; in the city centre, there is only an utterly pathetic **cathedral**, begun in 529 over a temple of Diana and rebuilt to death between 1561 and 1809. One thing Orange does have is original street names – sometimes unintentionally hilarious ones, such as Impasse du Parlement. **Rue Victor Hugo**, roughly following the route of the ancient Roman main street, leads out towards Orange's other Roman attraction. The **Arc de Triomphe**, which was built around AD 20, celebrates the conquests of the Second Gallic Legion with outlandish, almost abstract scenes of battling Romans and Celts. This is the epitome of the Provençal-Roman style: excellent, careful reliefs, especially in the upper frieze, portraying a naval battle, though with a touch of Celto-Ligurian strangeness in the details. Odd oval shields are a prominent feature, decorated with heraldic devices and thunderbolts. Seemingly random symbols at the upper left – a whip, a pitcher, something that looks like a bishop's crozier, and others – are in fact symbols of animal sacrifice and marine attributes (the 'crozier' is the prow of a ship). On the sides of the arch are heaps of arms – 'triumphs' – that were to influence the militaristic art fostered by rulers such as Emperor Charles V in the Renaissance. Little more than half a century before this arch was built, Orange was still Rome's wild frontier, and art such as this

Palais du Vin

t 04 90 11 50 00, www.lepalaisduvin.com;
open daily 10–7

evokes it vividly. Note the standards the legionaries are carrying: not the Roman eagle, but a boar.

When frontier days returned to Orange, in the Middle Ages, the arch was expanded into a castle by Raymond of Baux. It is said that Raymond arranged it so that the battle reliefs would be a wall of his dining hall; we have his arrogance to thank for their relatively good state of preservation. To sample some of the area's more recently created marvels, try the **Palais du Vin**, on the RN7, which offers a *vinothèque* (wine library), tastings and a restaurant.

Around Orange: Sérignan-du-Comtat and the 'Virgil of Insects'

Eight kilometres northeast of Orange on the D976, you can pay your respects to the great entomologist, botanist, scientist and poet **Jean-Henri Fabre** (1823–1915). Born into poverty, the largely self-taught Fabre qualified as a *lycée* teacher of sciences in Avignon, only to be fired in 1870 for explicitly describing the sex life of flowers to a night class of spinsters. Left without means, he borrowed money from his friend John Stuart Mill and settled in Orange for nine years, cranking out books on popular science on the average of one every four months – he was to produce more than 100 in total. He made enough in royalties to pay back his debts and in 1879 to buy an abandoned property in Sérignan that he called **L'Harmas**, the 'fallow land'. Fabre walled in the garden and planted 1,000 species of flowers and herbs, letting them run wild to create the perfect environment for his true passion: observing insects. Over the years he wrote 10 volumes of *Souvenirs entomologiques*, works of such beauty that he was twice nominated for the Nobel Prize for Literature. The Japanese, in particular, are huge fans; reissues of Fabre's books in Japan in 1991 sold more than a million copies. L'Harmas was bought by the state in 1922 (it's part of the Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle, based in Paris), and has been left as it was during Fabre's life: you can see his curious apparatus for observing insects, his collections of fossils, shells, rocks, insects, plants, eggs, coins and bones (including some human bones, chewed on by cannibals – not found locally, mind), letters from Darwin, and his harmonium, which he would play to accompany the lullabies and songs he wrote in Provençal. Most extraordinary of all is the display of a selection of his 700 watercolours of the fungi of the Vaucluse, so real that you can hardly believe they are only two-dimensional.

Sérignan-du-Comtat village has erected a **statue** to Fabre, magnifying glass in hand, in front of the convex Baroque façade of the parish **church**, and you can visit his grave in the village **cemetery**, with its Latin inscriptions, one from Seneca: 'Those who we believe lost have been sent in advance.'

L'Harmas

t 04 90 70 15 61, www.museum-paca.org/harmas-collections.htm;
open July and Aug Mon,
Tues, Thurs and Fri
10–12.30 and 3.30–7,
Sun 3.30–7; April–June
and Sept–Oct Mon,
Tues, Thurs and Fri
10–12.30 and 2.30–6,
Sun 2.30–6; closed Wed,
Sat, and Nov–Mar

i Orange >

5 Cours Aristide Briand,
t 04 90 34 70 88,
www.otorange.fr;
open April–Sept daily;
Oct–Mar Mon–Sat;
there's another office
opposite the Théâtre
Antique; open July
and Aug daily

★ Le Yaca >>

Market Days in Orange

Thurs am: Cours Aristide Briand.

In summer, Sat am: Place de la République.

Where to Stay and Eat in Orange

Orange **✉** 84100

*****Arène,** Place de Langes, t 04 90 11 40 40, www.hotel-arene.fr (€€€). A pleasant option on a quiet square, part of the Best Western group.

****St-Jean,** 7 Cours Pourtoles, t 04 90 51 15 16, www.avignon-et-provence.com/hotel-orange-france/hotel-saint-jean (€€). A charmingly restored

17th-century *hostellerie* with private parking, just steps from the Roman amphitheatre.

****Le Glacier,** 46 Cours Aristide Briand, t 04 90 34 02 01, www.le-glacier.com (€€–€). A typical Logis establishment, with friendly hosts and private parking. Some rooms have air-conditioning. *Closed end Dec.*

****St-Florent,** 4 Rue du Mazeau, t 04 90 34 18 53, www.hotelsaintflorent.com (€). A decent budget choice; all rooms have bath and TV. *Closed Jan and Feb.*

Le Yaca, 24 Place Sylvain, t 04 90 34 70 03 (€€). A friendly, pretty little restaurant with a range of appetizing Mediterranean menus. *Closed Tues eve, Wed and Nov.*

South of Orange: Châteauneuf-du-Pape

★ Châteauneuf-du-Pape

*Je veux vous chanter, mes amis/Ce vieux Châteauneuf que j'ai mis
Pour vous seuls en bouteille/ Il va faire merveille!*

*Quand de ce vin nous serons gris /Vénus applaudira nos ris:
Je prends à témoin Lise/La chose est bien permise!*

*(My friends, I want to sing to you/Of this old Châteauneuf that
I've bottled just for you/It will work miracles!*

*For when this wine makes us tipsy/Venus will crown our mirth:
I take Lise as my witness/No one will mind if I do!)*

Pope John XXII's drinking song

You'll begin to understand why Châteauneuf's wines are so expensive when you pass through the vineyards between Orange and Avignon. Blink, and you'll miss them. This pocket-sized wine region, tucked between the outskirts of Avignon and Orange, has become one of the most prosperous corners of France; every available square inch is covered with vines of a rare beauty, so immaculately precise and luxuriant that they resemble bonsai trees. Such good fortune is not without its disadvantages, however.

Châteauneuf-du-Pape, the very attractive village that gives the wine its name, has not resisted the temptation to become the Midi's foremost oenological tourist trap; along the main street there are few grocers or boutiques but plenty of wine shops, and in places it is hard to see the buildings for the signs advertising other shops or the winemakers' estates in the hinterlands.

Wine: Châteauneuf-du-Pape

An inspiration to both popes and lovers, Châteauneuf-du-Pape's reputation has remained strong through the ages; to safeguard it, in 1923 its growers agreed to the guarantees and controls that formed the basis for France's modern *Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée* (AOC) laws.

Several factors combine to give the wine its unique character: the alluvial red clay and the pebbly soil, brought down by a Rhône glacier in the last ice age; the *mistral*, which chases away the clouds and haze, allowing the sun to hit the grapes like an X-ray gun; and the wide palette of 13 varieties of grape that each winemaker can choose from: grenache, syrah, cinsault, mourvèdre, terret noir, vaccarese, counoise and muscardin for the reds (grenache can also be white); and clairette, bouboulenc, roussane, picpoul and picardan for the whites (clairette and picpoul can be red and white), 30 years ago dismissed as mere novelties and today celebrated as some of Provence's top wines – pale blond, with greenish highlights and a fresh, floral bouquet.

Because of the complex blends that give Châteauneuf its voluptuous qualities, the grapes are sorted by hand – uniquely among southern wines. The end result must have the highest alcoholic minimum of any great French wine (12.5%), a level achieved by spacing the vines a good 6–7ft apart to soak up the maximum amount of sun, and from the heat-absorbing pebbles underneath the vines that keep the grapes toasty after dark. Light, soft and fast to mature, a Châteauneuf-du-Pape red can be enjoyed much earlier than its Rhône rivals (often in three years) but only gets better the longer you can bear to wait.

In its home town, the wine is not exactly hard to find; even in the cellars it's not cheap, though, because a good deal of the *cuvées* dating from the late 1980s and early 1990s are superb, if somewhat difficult to get hold of. Contact the tourist office for a copy of a map of the vineyards: perhaps the best-known among the array of excellent wineries that welcome visitors are the **Château La Nerthe**, t 04 90 83 70 11, www.chateaulanerthe.fr, with its fascinating ancient cellars, and the vaulted cellars of **Château de la Gardine**, t 04 90 83 73 20, www.gardine.com.

In Bédarrides, the vineyards of **Domaine du Vieux Télégraphe**, 3 Route de Châteauneuf, t 04 90 33 00 31, www.vignoblesbrunier.fr, occupy a rugged promontory topped by a tower once used for optic telegraphic experiments; the 1993 and '95 reds and whites are excellent buys.

The three finest estates are in a class of their own and have such highly individual styles as to be unmistakable even when they're tasted blind. **Le Clos des Papes**, t 04 90 83 70 13, www.clos-des-papes.fr, is run by the highly intelligent and innovative Paul Vincent Avril. Avril is alone in employing humidifiers in his cellar to alleviate the drying effects of the *mistral* wind in particular and the heat in general. As a consequence, his wines have the best-defined fruit of the region and are the most elegant. With age, Avril's Châteauneuf-du-Pape can taste like expensive claret.

The wines of **Château de Beaucastel**, in Courthézon, t 04 90 70 41 00, www.beaucastel.com, have been consistently among the top wines of the *appellation*.

The most extraordinary source of Châteauneuf-du-Pape and possibly one of the country's most interesting wines is made by Emmanuel Raynaud at **Château Rayas**, t 04 90 83 73 09, www.chateaurayas.com. His wines are a must for all keen wine-lovers: they are the product of a bygone era – wines of incredible concentration and depth with the capacity to age for 20 years or more. Wines such as these are increasingly rare in an age when technology, which has helped to ensure that most wine is well made, also means that too many are sound but mediocre.

Among the vintages, 2003 was exceptional, after a long, hot, sunny summer; 2002 was a virtual write-off because of violent storms and huge rainfall, and 2001 was mixed, with some excellent wines available from respected sources (try before you buy) and others lacking acidity or being over-alcoholic. Going further back, 2000 is a top-class vintage with plenty of fruit, ripe tannins and an overall roundness that makes it easy to drink but also capable of ageing, and 1999 and 1998 were both outstanding. Most 1998 and 1999 wines make very good drinking now, but the top estates and *appellations* have produced wines that can be kept many years. The top Châteauneuf-du-Papes from these two vintages are simply wonderful wines.

★ La Mère
Germaine >>

i Châteauneuf-
du-Pape >

Place du Portail, t 04 90
83 71 08, www.
ccpro.fr/tourisme;
open Mon–Sat

Chocolaterie
Bernard Castelain
t 04 90 83 54 71

Market Days in Châteauneuf-du-Pape

Fri am: Av des Bosquets.

Festivals in Châteauneuf-du-Pape

July: *Floraïsons Musicales*.

Aug: *Fête Médiévale de la Véraison*,
a local town festival.

Where to Stay and Eat in Châteauneuf- du-Pape

Châteauneuf-du-Pape

✉ 84230

******Château des Fines Roches**, 2km
south of town on D17, t 04 90 83
70 23, www.chateau finesroches.com
(€€€€). An imposing and elegant but
entirely fake château (19th-century
vintage) with gardens, set among the
vineyards. The kitchen shines when it
comes to seafood dishes and desserts.

*Closed Nov; Oct–April restaurant closed
Sun–Tues lunch.*

*****La Sommellerie**, on D17 towards
Roquemaure, t 04 90 83 50 00, www.
hotel-la-sommellerie.com (€€€). A
restored 18th-century sheepfold with
12 peaceful rooms and 2 suites over-
looking the pool or the vines. The
restaurant, presided over by Pierre
Paumel, *maître cuisinier de France*,
serves delicately perfumed Provençal
dishes. Don't miss his reproductions
of Van Gogh's paintings in spun sugar.
*Closed Jan; restaurant closed Sun eve
and Mon in winter.*

La Mère Germaine, 3 Rue du
Commandant Lemaître, t 04 90 83 54
37, www.lameregermaine.com (€€–€).
A sweet old hotel-restaurant with a
gourmet restaurant (€€€) serving
tantalizing dishes such as *agneau aioli*
and *galet de Châteauneuf-du-Pape*.
The adjacent brasserie offers a
moderate *plat du jour* and dessert.

Le Verger des Papes, 2 Rue du
Château, t 04 90 83 50 94, www.
vergerdespapes.com (€€€–€€). Has a
stupedous terrace with huge views,
just below the castle ruins.

Legend has it that one of the first things that Clement V did on leaving Rome was inspect his vineyards to the north of Avignon. In 1316 his successor John XXII, who was a celebrated imbibor, went one better by building a castle here, which the Avignon popes used as a summer residence – a 14th-century version of Lazio's Castel Gandolfo. Sacked by the Protestants in the Wars of Religion, it was finally blown up by the retreating Germans in 1944; two crenellated walls are all that remain of it. Even if you don't like ruins or crowds, brave the hordes to have a look at the huge plain below you, and the Rhône muscling away on its route south to Avignon; wait till dusk if you can, for a magnificent sunset.

If you're bored with wine, down on the plain, on the Route d'Avignon, taste chocolate at the **Chocolaterie Bernard Castelain**.

The Left Bank of the Rhône

Once you cross the Rhône into the Gard region, the land takes on a more arid and austere profile, its knobby limestone hills and cliffs softened by crowns of silver olives and the green pinstripes of vines, especially in the river-bend north of Villeneuve lez Avignon along the D976. The landmark here is **Roquemaure**, where Pope

Clement V died his peculiar death (*see* p.43) in its now-ruined castle, although it's not his ghost who haunts it, but that of a lovely but leprous queen who was quarantined in the tower. After she died, Rhône boatmen would see her on summer nights, flitting along the bank, dressed in white and sparkling with jewels. Roquemaure's church of **St-Jean-Baptiste**, opened by Clement V in 1329, has sheltered since 1868 the relics of a certain St Valentine, whom it celebrates with a Festival of Lovers, involving locals in 19th-century costume (Terni, in Umbria, which enshrines the relics of its first bishop San Valentino in a basilica and celebrates his feast day on 14 February, would be surprised to learn this). The church also houses a superb organ of 1680, built for the *Cordeliers* in Avignon and transferred here in 1800, which still has all of its original pipes.

The D976 continues southwest past the charming little village of **Tavel**, a place that is just as haunted – in this instance by wine fiends come to slake their thirst on the pale ruby blood of the earth. **Lirac**, situated 2km to the north, is even smaller; a pretty kilometre's walk westwards from the village leads to the **Sainte-Baume**, a cave holy since time immemorial, and in which a statue of the Virgin was discovered in 1647; a hermitage was built on the outside of the cave-chapel.

To the north, little **St-Laurent-des-Arbres** used to be owned by the medieval bishops of Avignon, and has a fortified Romanesque church that was built in 1150, a tower and a castle keep.

Wine: Tavel and Lirac

The sun-soaked, pebbly limestone hills on the left bank of the Rhône are as celebrated for their rosés as Châteauneuf-du-Pape is for its reds and whites. Tavel, which has the longest pedigree, has been beloved of kings since the 13th century, when Philippe le Bel declared: 'It isn't good wine unless it's Tavel.' By the 1930s, the vine stocks – grenache, cinsault, bouboulenc, carignan and red clairette – were so old that Tavel nearly went the way of the dodo. Since revived to the tune of 825 healthy hectares, it has once again been crowned by the French as king of the rosé, the universal, harmonious summer wine that goes with everything from red meat to seafood. Be warned, however, that Tavel may be a little strong to less acclimatized, non-French constitutions.

Some growers add syrah and mourvèdre to give their Tavel extra body and colour, including the two best-known producers in the village, whom you can visit by ringing ahead: the de Bez family at the **Château d'Aquéria**, t 04 66 50 04 56, and the prize-winning **Domaine de la Mordorée**, t 04 66 50 00 75, www.domaine-mordoree.com, where the talented Christophe Delorme also bottles a potent red Côtes-du-Rhône, Lirac and Châteauneuf-du-Pape.

The Lirac district begins 3km to the north of Tavel and encompasses four *communes* – Roquemaure, Lirac, St-Laurent-des-Arbres and St-Geniès-de-Comolas. Its pebbly hills are similar to those of Tavel, and the *appellation* differs in the addition of two grape varieties – white ugni and maccabeo – and the fact that everything doesn't come up rosé: Lirac is making a name for its fruity whites, with a fragrance reminiscent of the wildflowers of the nearby *garrigue*, and for its well-structured reds. Wines can be sampled weekdays by appointment at **Domaine Duseigneur**, St-Laurent-des-Arbres, t 04 66 50 02 57, www.domaineduseigneur.com, and at **Château St-Roch**, Roquemaure, t 04 66 82 82 59, www.chateau-saint-roch.com.

★ Château de Varenne >

Where to Stay and Eat on the Left Bank of the Rhône

Roquemaure ☑ 30150

*****Château de Varenne**, Sauveterre, 4km from town, t 04 66 82 59 45, www.chateaudevarenne.com (€€€€). An 18th-century building set in a beautiful park with a pool. *Closed Jan–mid-Feb.*

****Le Clément V**, Rue Pierre Sépard (Route de Nîmes), t 04 66 82 67 58, www.hotel-clementv.com (€€). An excellent, moderately priced hotel

complete with a swimming pool. *Closed Jan; restaurant closed lunch.*

Tavel ☑ 30126

*****Auberge de Tavel**, Voie Romaine, t 04 66 50 03 41, www.auberge-de-tavel.com (€€). Charming, quiet, well-equipped rooms and a good restaurant (€€€). *Closed May–Oct; restaurant closed Wed and sometimes also Tues and Thurs.*

La Louisia, north of town near St-Laurent-des-Arbres, at crossroads on N580, t 04 66 50 20 60 (€€). A good place to try *gâteau de rascasse à l'américaine* (scorpion fish). *Closed Tues.*

Avignon

★ Avignon

Avignon has known more passions and art and power than any town in Provence, its mixture of excitement whipped to a frenzy by the *mistral*. But even the master of winds has never caused as much trouble as the papal court, a vortex of mischief that ruled Avignon for centuries, trailing violence, corruption and debauchery in its wake. 'In Paris one quarrels, in Avignon one kills,' wrote Hugo. In Avignon, Petrarch's platonic, courtly love for Laura was an aberration. 'Blood is hot there,' wrote an anonymous author in the 17th century, 'and the most serious occupation in the land is the search for pleasure... even most of the husbands are accommodating in love, and allow their wives the same freedoms they enjoy themselves.'

Avignon still has a twinkle in its eye; it is alive and ebullient, and has been one of France's most innovative cities ever since the Italian Renaissance filtered through here to the rest of Europe. As the cultural and publishing centre of the south, it rocked the cradle of the Félibrige, the Provençal literary movement (see pp.41–2), and since the Second World War it has been the stage for Europe's most exciting theatre festival. Charming it is not; yet, as an old Provençal proverb puts it: *Quau se lèvo d'Avignoun, se lèvo de la resoun* – 'He who takes leave of Avignon takes leave of his senses.'

History

Rome, AD 1303. Anarchy reigns, with popular riots, regular visits from foreign armies, and clans waging medieval gang warfare in the streets, transforming the tombs of the Caesars into urban fortresses. The papacy, although in the thick of it all, usually kept the papal person himself in places such as Viterbo and Anagni for safety's sake – just as it had the arrogant intriguer Boniface VIII,

Getting to and around Avignon

By Air

Avignon's airport (www.avignon.aeroport.fr), 8km southeast of town at Caumont, has Air France (t 04 90 81 51 51, t 0820 820 820) flights from many French and European destinations.

Avignon is also 20mins by taxi from Nîmes airport.

By Train

There are direct trains from London to Avignon on **Eurostar** in July–Sept, taking 6hrs, t 08705 186 186, www.eurostar.com. The **central train station** is on Bd St-Roch, central bookings t 08 36 35 35 35. The new **TGV station** is 3km to the south; there is a shuttle bus every 15mins to the centre. Avignon is on the Paris–Marseille TGV line, and has frequent links to Arles, Montpellier, Nîmes, Orange, Toulon and Carcassonne.

By Bus

The **gare routière** is next to the train station (Avenue Monclar, t 04 90 82 07 35). There are plenty of daily buses to Carpentras, Cavaillon, St-Rémy-de-Provence, Orange, Arles and Nîmes, one early-morning run to Nice changing at Aix-en-Provence and Cannes (plus 5 to Aix), several to Marseille and Salon-de-Provence, Fontaine-de-Vaucluse, and some services to the Pont du Gard, Uzès, Châteaurenard, Châteauneuf-du-Pape and Tarascon.

For Villeneuve lez Avignon, take city bus 11 from the post office, train station or Porte de l'Oulle (buy tickets on board).

By Boat

Travellers of yore approached Avignon by boat – a thrill still possible with a lunch or dinner cruise with the **Grands Bateaux de Provence**, based at Allées de l'Oulle, t 04 90 85 62 25, www.mireio.net; the food is delicious and an afternoon's exploration of Arles is included. From mid-June to mid-Sept, the same firm runs regular **Bateau-Bus** trips between Avignon and Villeneuve lez Avignon. The tourist office has information on other cruise boats. You can also spend a week on the Rhône and Saône on the *Princesse de Provence* (April–Nov); contact **Peter Deilmann Cruises**, www.eurorivercruises.com.

There is also a free **shuttle** from the foot of Pont St-Bénézet to the Ile de la Barthelasse (*July and Aug daily 11–9, April–June and Sept daily 10–12.30 and 2–6.30; Oct–Dec Wed 2–5.30, Sat and Sun 10-12 and 2–5.30*).

Car Hire

Veo, 151 Av Pierre Sépard, t 04 90 87 53 43, www.veolocation.com,

Rent a Car, 130 Av Pierre Sépard, t 04 90 88 08 02, www.rentacar.fr.

There are free **car parks** outside the city walls; **Parking de l'Ile Piot** has a free shuttle to the town centre.

Bike Hire

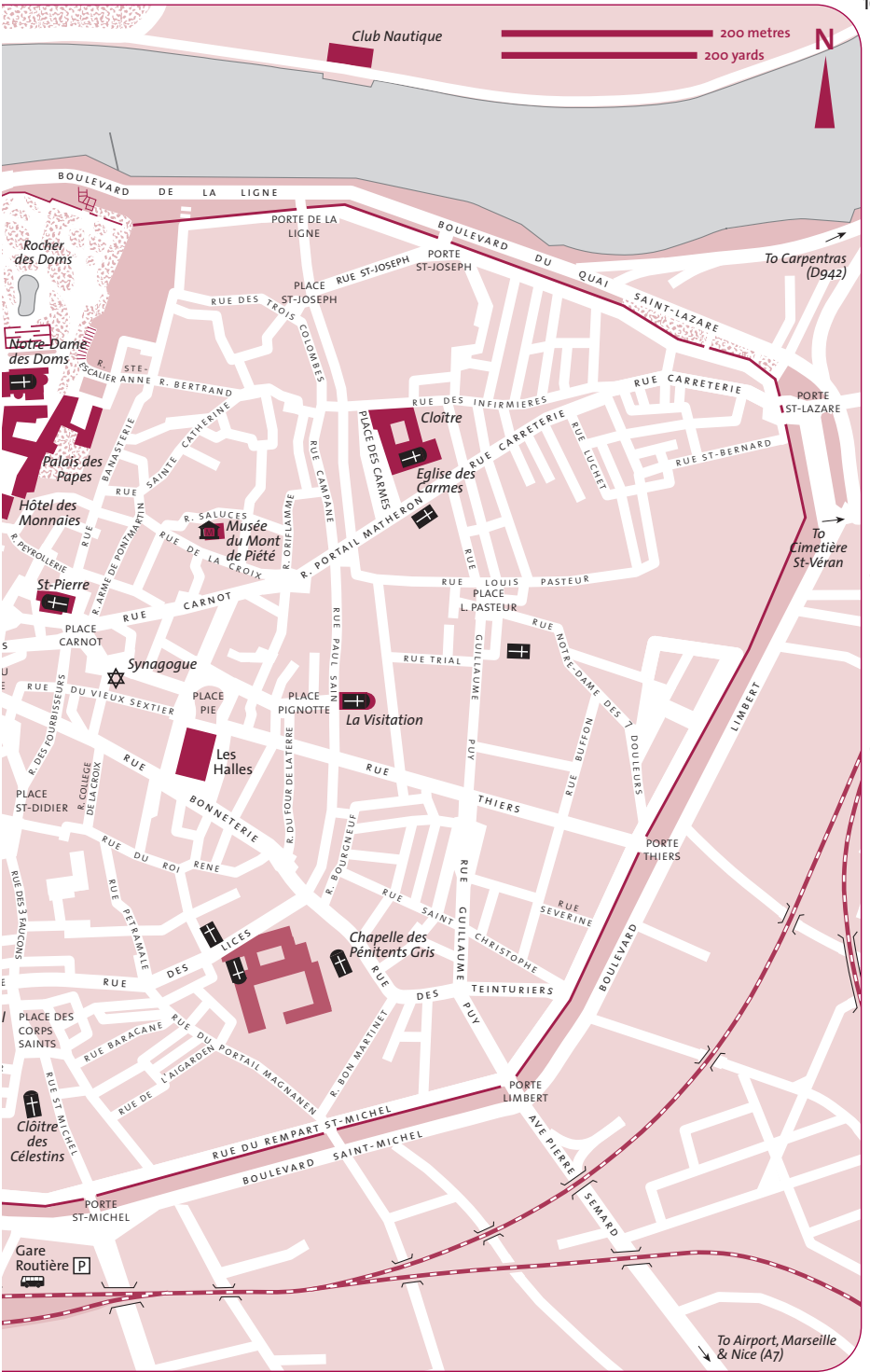
Holiday Bikes, 20 Bd St-Roch, t 04 32 76 25 88, www.provence-bike.com.

Provence Bike, 52 Bd St-Roch, t 04 90 27 92 61.

La Maison du Jardin, 80 Rue Guillaume Puy, t 04 90 86 32 49.

who was now fresh in his grave. Boniface's arch-enemy, Philip the Fair of France, had just bribed the conclave to elect a Frenchman, Clement V. Philip also suggested that the new pope flee the inferno of Rome for the safer havens of the Comtat Venaissin in Provence (see p.242) – and Clement didn't have to be asked twice.

The Church had picked up this piece of Provence real estate as its spoils after the Albigensian Crusade (see p.25). Isolated within it was the little city-republic of Avignon, belonging to the Angevin counts of Provence – old papal allies, who welcomed their illustrious visitor. Clement V always intended to return to Rome, but when he died the French cardinals elected a former archbishop



of Avignon, John XXII (1316–34), who moved the Curia into his old episcopal palace and greatly enriched the papacy (through alchemy, it was rumoured: see p.43). Although he enlarged the palace with the proceeds, it still wasn't roomy enough for his successor, Benedict XII (1334–42), who replaced it with another palace, or for Clement VI (1342–52), who added yet another.

It seemed that the popes meant to stay forever, especially after 1348, when Clement purchased Avignon outright from the young Angevin Countess of Provence, Jeanne I^{re} of Naples, for the sale price of 80,000 florins and an absolution for her possible involvement in the suspicious strangulation of her husband.

Meanwhile, all the profits that the 14th-century papal machine generated – from tithes, the sale of indulgences, pardons and offices, and the visits of pilgrims – went to Avignon instead of Rome. Overcrowding, debauchery, dirt, luxury, plague, blackmail and crime came with the deal – troubles exacerbated by papal tolerance that admitted outcasts from everywhere else into Avignon, as long as they could pay. Such refugees included not only common criminals but also Jews and, during the Schism, heretics. The Italians, mortified at losing their cash cow during this 'Babylonian captivity', expressed their self-righteous indignation through the long-time Avignon resident Petrarch: 'Avignon is the hell of living people, the thoroughfare of vice, the sewers of the earth... Prostitutes swarm on the papal beds.' Yet these same popes summoned the best *trecento* artists from Italy, especially from Siena, who perfected in Avignon the elegant, courtly, fairytale style of painting known as International Gothic. And when he wasn't being outraged, Petrarch wrote incomparable love sonnets to his beloved Laura, a mysterious figure believed to have been an ancestress of the Marquis de Sade.

In 1377 Avignon's population rose to approximately 30,000 souls, a third of them under religious orders. In that year, St Catherine of Siena convinced the seventh Avignon pope, Gregory XI, to return to Rome. The pope came, he saw, he sickened, but before he could pack his bags to return to Avignon, he died. The Roman mob seized their chance and physically forced the cardinals to elect an Italian pope who would re-establish the papacy in Rome. When the French cardinals escaped the Romans' clutches, they sparked off the Great Schism by electing a French antipope, Clement VII, and went back to Avignon. A Church council held in Pisa 30 years later to resolve the conflict only ended in the election of a third pope. In 1403 the French went over to the Rome faction and sent in an army to persuade Avignon's second antipope, Benedict XIII, to leave for his native Catalunya – where he spent the rest of his life bitterly raining anathemas and excommunications on all and sundry.

When the Church finally decided on one pope, Avignon and the Comtat Venaissin settled in for three and a half centuries of relaxed rule by cardinal legates, under whom the debauchery and violence continued, although on a more modest level. The party really came to an end when the Comtat Venaissin was incorporated into France during the Revolution in a blood rite of atrocities and the destruction of centuries of art and architecture.

But even as part of France, Avignon has maintained its lively international character. Publishers who first set up shop with the popes stayed on under the cardinal legates, beyond the bounds of French censorship (there were 20 in town before the Revolution); in the 1850s they took on a new life publishing the works of the Félibrige. In 1946 actor Jean Vilar founded the Avignon Festival of Theatre and Film, the liveliest and most popular event in the Provençal calendar. The city was also European City of Culture in 2000, and some of its monuments have been listed as UNESCO World Heritage sites. The TGV has made Paris less than 3 hours away, and a summer Eurostar route direct from London brings even more of Europe to its door.

The Famous Half-Bridge

From the north, Avignon is a brave two-tiered sight: in front rise the sheer cliffs of the **Rocher des Doms**, which has been inhabited since Neolithic times, and behind it the sheer artificial cliffs of the **Palais des Papes**, the same colour as the rock and almost as haphazard a pile. The ensemble includes the **walls** that the popes wrapped around Avignon: bijou, toothsome garden walls ever since Viollet-le-Duc recrenellated them and filled in the moat in 1860.

From the walls, four arches of a bridge leapfrog into the Rhône, sidle up to a waterbound, two-storey Romanesque **chapel** (the lower half of which is dedicated to St Nicolas, the patron of Rhône boatmen) and then stop abruptly mid-river, long before reaching Villeneuve lez Avignon on the distant bank. This is the famous

Pont St-Bénézet

t 04 32 74 32 74,
www.palais-des-
papes.com; open Aug
9–9; July and 1–15 Sept
9–8; 15 Mar–June and
16 Sept–Oct 9–7; 1–14
Mar 9–6,30; Nov–Feb
9,30–5.45

Pont St-Bénézet, otherwise known simply as the **Pont d'Avignon**, begun in 1185. It was built during a time when all bridges were the work of either devils or saints; in this case a shepherd boy named Bénézet, obeying the mandates of heaven, single-handedly laid the huge foundation stones. Originally 22 arches and three-quarters of a kilometre long, the bridge enriched Avignon with its tolls: its presence was a major factor in the popes' decision to live here. In 1660 the Avignonnais got tired of the constant repairs it demanded, however, and abandoned it to the monsters of the Rhône. Now only the four arches remain.

And did they ever '*danse, tout en rond*' on their bridge, as the nursery song would have it? No, they didn't, the historians say, although they may well have danced *under* it on the mid-river

Ile de la Barthelasse, formerly a hunting reserve and the headquarters for Avignon's prostitutes and thieves. It was here that in later years the Avignonnais came for Sunday picnics. The *Félibres* (see pp.41–2) liked to bring pretty 'Félibresses' here to recite poetry. In summer people still come to cool off in its Olympic-size pool.

Palais des Papes

For a curious sensation, park directly under the popes' palace and take the lift up to the traffic-free **Place du Palais**. Once crowded with houses, it was cleared by antipope Benedict XIII to emphasize the message of the palace's vertical, impregnable walls: 'You would think it was an Asiatic tyrant's citadel rather than the abode of the vicar of the God of peace,' wrote Prosper Mérimée. But the life of a 14th-century pope justified paranoia. What is less obvious is that the life of a 14th-century pope and his cardinals, courtiers, mistresses and toadies was also extremely luxurious. The palace was spared in the Revolution only to end up serving as a prison and a barracks, and until 1920 its bored residents chipped off frescoes to sell to tourists, so that on most of the walls the only remaining decoration is an extraordinary variety of masons' marks. The entrance is up the steps, in the centre of Clement VI's façade.

Old Palace: Ground Floor

After crossing the **Cour d'Honneur**, the great courtyard dividing Benedict XII's stern Cistercian **Palais Vieux** (1334–42) from Clement VI's flamboyant **Palais Neuf** (1342–52), you start the tour in the **Jesus Hall**, so called for its decorative monograms of Christ. Once used to house the pope's treasure and account books, it now contains a hoard of maps, views of old Avignon and curios, such as a pair of 17th-century bell-ringing figures (*jacquemarts*). The most valuable loot was stored behind walls 10ft thick in the windowless bowels of the **Angels' Tower**, its ceiling supported by a single stone pillar resembling an enormous palm tree.

Next is the **Consistory**, where the cardinals met and received ambassadors; as its lavish frescoes and ceiling burned in 1413, it now displays 19th-century pictures of Avignon's popes and Simone Martini's *Virgin of Humility* fresco, detached from the cathedral porch in 1960. Under the fresco, the restorers found Martini's *sinopia*, or initial line sketch, etched in the stone. As an artist could only paint a small patch of fresh, wet plaster a day, such *sinopie* were essential to maintain the composition, and these, as is often the case in Italy, give a clearer idea of the painter's intent than the damaged fresco itself. There are traces of *sinopie in situ* in the **Chapelle St-Jean**, dedicated to both Johns, the Baptist and the Evangelist. Matteo Giovannetti of Viterbo, a *trecento* charmer who left the bulk of his work in Avignon, did the frescoes for Clement VI:

Palais des Papes

t 04 90 27 50 00, www.palais-des-papes.com;
open Aug 9–9; July and
1–15 Sept 9–8; 15
Mar–June and 16
Sept–Oct 9–7; 1–14 Mar
9–6.30; Nov–Feb
9.30–5.45; adm; last
ticket 1hr before closing;
optional English
audioguide

saints floating overhead in starry blue landscapes (recall that at the time ultramarine blue paint was even more expensive than gold). On one wall, John's head is served to Herod at table, as if in a restaurant.

Old Palace: First Floor

The tour continues to the first floor and the banqueting hall, or **Grand Tinel**, hung with 18th-century Gobelin tapestries. Although big enough for a football pitch, the Grand Tinel was too small to hold all the cardinal-electors who would gather in a conclave 10 days after a pope's death. Masons were brought in to accommodate them: the arches at the far end were knocked down to give the cardinals more room to manoeuvre (in both senses of the word), while the doors and windows were bricked up to keep them from bringing in more food and endlessly prolonging the conclave. The trick always worked, for the appetites of the 14th-century Curia were Pantagruelian – the adjacent **Upper Kitchen** boasts a pyramidal chimney that could easily handle a roast elephant, or the menu of Clement VI's coronation feast: a total of 1,023 sheep, 118 cows, 101 calves, 914 kids, 60 pigs, 10,471 hens, 1,446 geese and 300 pike, topped off by 46,856 cheeses and 50,000 tarts, all consumed by just 3,000 guests – some 16 tarts per person, with a few thousand left over for the pope's midnight snack. Off the Grand Tinel, more delightful frescoes by Matteo Giovannetti decorate the **Chapelle St-Martial**, celebrating the French saint who came from the same Limousin village as Benedict XII.

New Palace

The tour continues to the **Pope's Antechamber**, where he would hold private audiences, and then on to the **Pope's Bedroom** in the Angels' Tower, a room covered with murals of spiralling foliage, birds and birdcages. It leads directly into the New Palace and the most delightful room in the entire palace, the **Chambre du Cerf**, Clement VI's study, where he would come 'to seek the freedom of forgetting he was pope'. In 1343 he had Matteo Giovannetti (probably) lead a group of French painters in depicting outdoor scenes of hunting, fishing and peach-picking that not only quickened the papal gastric juices, but expressed what was then a revolutionary new interest in the natural world, where flowers and foliage were drawn from observation rather than copying a 'source'. The arrows direct you next to the **Sacristy**, crowded with statues of kings, queens and bishops escaped from Gargantua's chessboard, followed by Clement VI's **Great Chapel**, longer even than the Grand Tinel and just as empty, though the altar has been reconstructed. The **Robing Room** off the chapel contains casts of the Avignon popes' tombs. Revolutionaries bashed most of the

figures that once adorned the elaborate **Chapel Gate**; through the bay window in front of this, the pope would bless and give indulgences to pilgrims. A grand stair leads down to the flamboyant **Great Audience Hall**, where Matteo Giovannetti's *Prophets* remains intact, along with outline sketches of a *Crucifixion* that would certainly have been splendid if it had ever been completed.

Around the Palace: Notre-Dame-des-Doms

Before spray paint, the posterity-minded had to record their passing with family emblems. None did it better than the family of the Borghese pope, Paul V; his nephew, legate in Avignon, produced the striking 1619 **Hôtel des Monnaies**, or mint, just across from the Palais des Papes, where reliefs of the Borghese dragon and eagle prance in garlands of fruit salad. To the left of the palace is Avignon's cathedral, **Notre-Dame-des-Doms**, built in 1150, its landmark square bell-tower ridiculously dwarfed by a massive gilt statue of the Virgin added in 1859 – an unsuccessful attempt to make the church stand out next to the overwhelming papal pile. The interior has been fuzzily Baroqued like a soft-centre chocolate, but it's worth focusing on the good bits: the dome at the crossing, with an octagonal drum pierced by light, the masterpiece of this typically Provençal conceit; the 11th- or 12th-century marble bishop's chair in the choir; and, in a chapel next to the sacristy, now the **Trésor** (*adm*), the flamboyant Tomb of John XXII (d. 1334) by English sculptor Hugh Wilfred, mutilated in the Revolution and restored in the 19th century with a spare effigy of a bishop on top to replace the smashed pope.

Next to the cathedral, ramps lead up to the oasis of the **Rocher des Doms**, which is now a garden enjoying panoramic views from the Rhône below to Mont Ventoux rising to the northeast. Peacocks squawk and preen in trees so crippled by the *mistral* that they need crutches; you can tell the hour with your own shadow on a sundial called the *cadran solaire annalemattique*, and admire a statue dedicated to an Armenian refugee named Jean Althen who 'introduced the cultivation of madder to the Midi' (don't laugh; used for producing dyes, madder was once the south's most important cash crop).

Musée du Petit Palais

Overlooking the Rhône at the end of the Place des Papes stands the Petit Palais, built in 1318 and modified in 1474 to suit the tastes of Cardinal Legate Giuliano della Rovere – one day to become Michelangelo's patron and nemesis as Pope Julius II. In 1958 the Petit Palais became a museum to hold all the medieval works remaining in Avignon.

Musée du Petit Palais

t 04 90 86 44 58,
www.petit-palais.com;
open June–Sept
Wed–Mon 10–6;
Oct–May Wed–Mon
10–1 and 2–6; adm

Although the scale of the Petit Palais can be daunting, it contains rare treats from the dawn of the Renaissance by artists hailing for the most part from Siena or Florence. But Avignon gets its say as well: the sculptures and pretty courtly frescoes from the 12th to the 14th centuries in the first two rooms demonstrate the city's role in creating and diffusing the late International Gothic style. The third room contains some fascinating fragments of the 35ft, eight-storey **tomb of Cardinal Jean de Lagrange** (1389), which stood in Avignon's temple of St-Martial before the Revolution. One bit that survived was the *transi*, or relief, of the decomposing corpse that occupied the lowest level of the tomb and was carved with morbid anatomical exactitude. Such *memento mori*, always used to contrast the handsome effigy of the deceased while alive, would soon become popular in northern France. The mouldering Cardinal Lagrange is one of the earliest examples, and may even be the prototype of the genre.

The next six rooms glow with the gold backgrounds (the better to show up in dim churches) of 14th- and early 15th-century Italian painting. Nearly all depict the Virgin and Child, a reflection of the cult of Mariolatry and chivalric ideals of womanhood that began where the troubadours left off. Although the subject matter is repetitive, it makes it easy to trace the medieval revolution in art and seeing, back in the good old days when art was content merely to imitate nature and not try to outdo her. The iconic, Byzantine flatness of the earliest paintings (especially Paolo Veneziano's *Virgin* of 1340, which has, remarkably, never been restored in its 660 years) begins to give way to a more natural depiction of space, composition and human form after the innovations of Giotto in Italy (especially Taddeo Gaddi, Pseudo Jacopino di Francesco, Lorenzo Monaco and Gherardo Starnina). Meanwhile, Sieneese artists, following the lead of the great Duccio di Buoninsegna, took up a more elegant, stylized line and richer colours (Simone Martini and many works by Taddeo di Bartolo).

The taste of Avignon's popes for Sieneese art made the latter the strongest influence in the International Gothic style forged at the papal court (Room 8), a style that the Sieneese kept at long after the Florentines had moved on to new things – see Giovanni di Paolo's *Nativity* (1470), or Pietro di Domenico da Montepulciano's kinky *Vierge de Miséricorde* (1420), a delicate portrayal of a congregation sheltered under the Virgin's mantle while a band of flagellants whip themselves. Bridal chests (*cassoni*) were often used to illustrate cautionary tales for women: in Room 9 see Domenico de Michelino's *cassoni* panels of 1450 on the story of *Susanna and the Elders*.

Renaissance Gems, Sacred and Profane

Beyond the *salon de repos* hangs the museum's best-known work, Botticelli's *Virgin and Child*, a tender, lyrical painting from his youth, inspired by his (and Leonardo da Vinci's) master, Verrocchio. The next few rooms offer nothing as striking until Room 15 and its four delightful narrative panels from bridal chests (c. 1510) by the Maestro dei Cassoni Campana. This unknown master's meticulous miniaturist style is as rare as the subject of his cautionary tale, *The Minotaur*, beginning with Queen Pasiphae of Crete's love for a white bull, resulting in the birth of the Minotaur. The third panel shows Ariadne and her ball of twine and Theseus slaying the Minotaur in an exquisite circular labyrinth.

The sacred equivalent of the *cassoni* is in Room 16b: the *Sacra Conversazione* by Venetian Vittore Carpaccio, lyrical master of charm, colour and incidental detail. Such 'sacred conversations' portray the Virgin and saints meditating together on matters sublime, to the accompaniment of angelic music. To this, Carpaccio has added a landscape dominated by a natural rock bridge, where episodes from the lives of saints Jerome, Augustine and Paul the Hermit take place.

Lastly, Rooms 17–19 are devoted to works by French artists in Avignon, who after 1440 formed one of the most important schools of French Renaissance art. Influenced by the realism of Flemish oil painting (introduced to Avignon by Benedict XIII) and the almost abstract, decorative lines of the Italians, it concentrates on strong, simple images, as in the altarpiece *Virgin and Child between Two Saints* (1450), by the school's greatest master, Enguerrand Quarton, with a pair of luminous shutters with saints Michael and Catherine on the reverse by Josse Lieferinxe. Or take two works by an accomplished but unknown hand: the striking *Jacob's Dream* and the lyrical *Adoration of the Child* (c. 1500), where the well-dressed donor seems to have stumbled unexpectedly on to the divine mystery.

Place de l'Horloge and Quartier des Fusteries

Just below the Place du Palais, an antique carousel spins gaily in the lively centre of old Avignon, **Place de l'Horloge**, site of the old Roman forum, now full of buskers and holiday layabouts. The timepiece of its name is in the 1363 tower of the Hôtel de Ville; this originally belonged to a Benedictine monastery on the site, but was secularized with a clock and two *jaquemarts* who sound the hours. They aren't the only archaic figures here: many first-time visitors do a double-take when they notice the windows on the east side of the square, filled with *trompe-l'œil* paintings of historic personages who all are linked in some way to the city.

Behind the Hôtel de Ville lies the **Quartier des Fusteries**, named after the wood merchants and carpenters who had their workshops here in the Middle Ages. These were replaced in the 18th century with *hôtels particuliers*: in one, the **Maison aux Ballons** (with little iron balloons on the window sills) at 18 Rue St-Etienne, Joseph de Montgolfier discovered the principle of balloon flight in 1782, when he noticed how his shirt, drying by the fire, puffed up and floated in the hot air. From the Quartier des Fusteries, the steep picturesque lanes of the **Quartier de la Balance** wind back up to the Place du Palais.

Off Place de l'Horloge and Rue St-Agricol, Rue du Collège-du-Roure leads to the fine mid-15th-century **Palais du Roure**, marked by a flamboyant gate topped with intertwining mulberry branches in memory of the Taverne de Mûrier that it replaced. Equally flamboyant was the 19th-century descendant of the Florentine family who built it, the Félibre poet Marquis Baroncelli-Javon, who preferred to spend his time as a cowboy in the Camargue and lent this town house to Mistral as a headquarters for his Provençal-language journal *Aiòli*. It now houses a **study centre** and exhibits on the language.

Rue St-Agricol is named after the restored Gothic church of **St-Agricol** (1326); its treasure is the *Doni Retable*, a rare Provençal work from the Renaissance. At No.19 is the **Librairie Roumanille**, founded in 1855 by the Avignon poet Joseph Roumanille, father of the Félibrige (see pp.41–2). The bookshop published the movement's first masterpiece, Mistral's epic *Mireio* (1859), and continues to put out books in Provençal, while Avignon's literati chum around in the shop's atmospheric 19th-century *salon*.

Palais du Roure study centre

t 04 90 80 80 88;
open to students only
Mon–Fri 9–12 and
2–5.30; closed Aug; free
guided tours Tues at
3pm, and by appt

Museums around Avignon

At the end of Rue St-Agricol curves Rue Joseph Vernet, lined with 18th-century *hôtels particuliers*, antiques shops, and pricey restaurants and cafés. The kind of overly ornate spindly furniture, porcelains and knick-knacks that originally embellished these mansions is on display nearby at No.17 Rue Victor Hugo, in the

Musée Louis Vouland.

More exciting are the contents of the handsome **Hôtel de Villeneuve-Martignan**, at 65 Rue Joseph Vernet, first opened to the public as a 'cabinet of curiosities' in the late 18th century by collector Esprit Calvet. Now the **Musée Calvet**, it offers something for every taste: 6,000 pieces of wrought iron, Greek sculpture, 18th-century seascapes by Avignon native Claude-Joseph Vernet and paintings of ruins by Hubert Robert and Panini, mummies, a portrait of Diane de Baroncelli (grandmother of the Marquis de Sade), a bust of a boy by Renaissance sculptor Desiderio da

Musée Louis Vouland

t 04 90 86 03 79,
www.vouland.com;
open May–Oct Tues–Sat
10–12 and 2–6, Sun 2–6;
Nov–April Tues–Sun
2–6; adm

Musée Calvet

t 04 90 86 33 84; open
Wed–Mon 10–1 and
2–6; adm

Musée Requien

t 04 90 82 43 51; open
Tues–Sat 10–1 and 2–6

Musée Lapidaire

t 04 90 85 75 38;
open Wed–Mon 10–1
and 2–6; adm

Musée Angladon

t 04 90 82 29 03, www.
angladon.com; open
May–Nov Tues–Sun 1–6;
Dec–April Wed–Sun 1–6;
hols 3–6; other times
for groups by appt; adm

**Lambert
Collection**

t 04 90 16 56 20, www.
collection.lambert.com;
open July–Aug daily
11–7; Sept–June
Tues–Sun 11–6

**Musée du Mont
de Piété**

t 04 90 86 53 12;
open Mon–Fri
8.30–11.30 and 1.30–5

Settignano, tapestries, prehistoric statue-steles, dizzy kitsch paintings of nude men (David's *Mort de Bara* and Horace Vernet's *Mazepa and the Wolves*), as well as an excellent collection of 19th- and 20th-century paintings by Corot, Guigou, Soutine, Daumier, Dufy, Morisot, Utrillo, Seurat, Toulouse-Lautrec, Vlaminck and Rouault. For all that, the best part of this museum may be the building itself, a light and airy palace from the Age of Enlightenment that complements perfectly the soft, romanticized landscapes and portraits on the walls.

Adjacent to the Calvet museum, the **Musée Requien** is Avignon's fuddy-duddy natural history collection, where a massive beaver found in the Sorgue steals the show. Lastly, at 27 Rue de la République, in the chilly 17th-century chapel of a Jesuit college, are the stone sculptures of the **Musée Lapidaire**. It's worth popping in for the 2nd-century BC (or Merovingian) man-eating *Tarasque de Noves*, each hand gripping the head of a Gaul, while an arm dangles from its greedy jaws; for the statues of Gallic warriors, looking much nattier in their mail than Astérix; or for the unlabelled masks in petal-like hoods. There is good Renaissance sculpture as well, but the best is in the nearby church of **St-Didier** (1359), just to the north in Place St-Didier: Francesco Laurana's polychrome reredos of Christ bearing the Cross, called *Notre-Dame du Spasme* for the spasm of pain on Mary's face; it was one of the first Renaissance sculptures to reach France, executed for the Bon Roi René in 1478. Opposite, in the first chapel on the left, are some c. 1360 Florentine frescoes, uncovered in 1952.

More 14th-century frescoes have been restored opposite the church in the **Livrée de Ceccano**, now the town library. Nearby, at 5 Rue Laboureur, the treasures of a serious art collector named Jean Angladon-Dubrujeaud have been opened to the public as the **Musée Angladon**. These include Renaissance and Art Deco furniture, bronzes and African art, but the main reason for coming is a fine assortment of modern painting never before seen: works by Modigliani, Picasso, Manet, Degas and Cézanne, as well as the only Van Gogh on display in Provence, called *Les Wagons de chemin de fer*.

Situated in the 18th-century Hôtel de Caumont at 5 Rue Violette off the southern end of Rue Joseph Vernet, the **Lambert Collection** features modern art by the likes of Basquiat, and has a café and bookshop attached.

Back past the Hôtel des Monnaies towards the Place des Carmes, the **Musée du Mont de Piété** at 6 Rue Saluces, the oldest pawnbroker's in France, houses the town archives and some silk desiccators that were used to work out the dry weight of Avignon's former chief commodity.

The Eastern Quarters

From Place St-Didier, Rue du Roi René is lined with chiselled palaces, one built on the site of the church of **Ste-Claire** (No.22), where Petrarch first saw his Laura on Good Friday 1327. ('It was the day when the sun darkened, as God Himself vanished into death, when I was taken,' he wrote.) Laura died, probably of the plague, in 1348, and was buried nearby in the Franciscan **Couvent des Cordeliers**, by the corner of Rue des Lices and Rue des Teinturiers; only the Gothic bell-tower survived the fury of the Revolution. In 1533 a humanist from Lyon claimed to have found Laura's tomb in the church, and such was Petrarch's reputation that François I^{er} made a special trip to Avignon to see it.

Rue des Teinturiers, the most picturesque street in Avignon, was named after the dyers and textile-makers who powered their machines on waterwheels in the Sorgue, two of which survive. Shaded by ancient plane trees, crossed by little bridges, it is a pleasant place to dawdle over a beer or dinner; it's hard to believe this Sorgue is the same stream that comes bursting like a bomb out of that other Petrarchan shrine, the Fontaine-de-Vaucluse (see pp.240–41). Rue des Teinturiers turns into Rue Bonneterie on its way to Avignon's shopping district and **Place Pie**, home of the ugly-duckling new market (**Les Halles**), although the produce inside is fit for a swan.

Another evocative street, **Rue du Vieux-Sextier**, once the site of the Jewish ghetto, is the address of Avignon's 19th-century **synagogue**, while, just beyond Place Carnot, **St-Pierre's** flamboyant façade boasts a set of beautifully carved walnut doors (1551). Facing St-Pierre, Avignon's cosiest museum, **Musée Théodore Aubanel**, is a private institution dedicated to printing in Avignon, and to the romantic poet and Félibre Théodore Aubanel, whose family still owns one of Avignon's oldest publishing houses. From Place St-Pierre, Rue Carnot continues towards the charming **Place des Carmes**, which is dominated by the 14th-century **Eglise des Carmes** (church of the White Friars), Avignon's biggest church, with a pretty cloister that has been refurbished as a Festival venue.

Visitors in the 19th century would continue from here along Rue Carreterie, out of the city gate and down the Lyon road to the **Cimetière St-Véran**, a romantic, shady park where John Stuart Mill and his wife Harriet are buried. Harriet died at the Hôtel d'Europe in 1858 – a loss so devastating for the philosopher of utilitarianism that he lived in a house by the cemetery until he himself died in 1873. Another celebrated tomb belongs to Maurille de Sombreuil, who became a heroine during the Revolution when, to save the life of her father, the governor of the Invalides, she drank a goblet of human blood. Contemporaries noted that she favoured white wine after that.

Musée Théodore Aubanel

t 04 90 86 35 02; open for weekday morning visits by appt only; closed Aug; adm

i Avignon >>

41 Cours Jean Jaurès,
t 04 32 74 32 74,
www.avignon-tourisme.com; open
April–Oct daily;
Nov–Mar Mon–Sat and
Sun am; guided city
tours April–Oct

Services in Avignon

Post office: Cours Président Kennedy, just inside the Porte de la République, near the train station.

Market Days in Avignon

Tues–Sun am: covered market, Les Halles, Place Pie.

Sat am: flower market, Place des Carmes.

Sun: flea market, Place des Carmes.

Festivals in Avignon

In 1947 Jean Vilar with his Théâtre National Populaire founded the **Avignon Festival**, with the aim of bringing theatre to the masses. It is now rated among the top international theatre festivals in Europe, and in July and August Avignon overflows with performances by the Théâtre National and others, the cinemas host films from all over the world, and there are concerts in the churches.

The **Maison Jean Vilar**, 8 Rue de Mons, t 04 90 86 59 64, www.maisonjeanvilar.org (open July daily 10.30–6.30; Sept–June Tues–Fri 9–12 and 1.30–5.30, Sat 10–5; closed Aug), is the nerve centre and hosts exhibitions, films and lectures the rest of the year. For festival bookings, contact the **Bureau du Festival d'Avignon**, Espace Saint-Louis, 20 Rue Portail Boquier, 84000 Avignon, t 04 90 27 66 50, www.festival-avignon.com.

During the festival, Avignon's squares and streets overflow with fringe (or 'Off') performers, www.avignonleoff.com or www.avignon-off.net. You can relax and discuss the latest events during the festival in **Le Bar du Off**.

Otherwise, there seems to be some sort of festivity every month, whether it's the **New Wine Festival** (Nov), **Passion for Horses** (*Cheval Passion*, Jan), **contemporary dance** (Feb), a **Triathlon** (June) or **fireworks** on 14 July. The monthly broadsheet *Rendez-Vous*, from the tourist office, has exhaustive listings.

Shopping in Avignon

Chic designer shops are found along Rue St-Agricol and Rue Joseph Vernet. *Pâtisseries* in this area sell Avignon's gourmand speciality, *papalines*, made of fine chocolate and a liqueur, *d'Origan du Comtat*, distilled from 60 herbs picked from the slopes of Mont Ventoux and said to be a sure cure for cholera. You will find all the regional specialities: *fruits confits d'Apt*, *berlingots de Carpentras*, *melon de Cavailon*, *nougat de Sault*, *truffe de Carpentras et du Tricastin*, garlic, olives, honey, *pastis*, goat's cheese, *fougasse* (a kind of French *focaccia*) and *herbes de Provence*. There are also essential oils, *santons*, bold Provençal fabrics, local pottery and soaps.

Behind the Hôtel de Ville, in Place de l'Horloge, the **Maison des Pays de Vaucluse**, t 04 90 85 55 24, has a large display of regional products and crafts.

Where to Stay in Avignon

Avignon ☑ 84000

Avignon gets packed in July and August and many places raise their rates. There are other choices across the river in Villeneuve lez Avignon (see p.119), and a huge number of chain hotels around the suburbs.

The area also has a large number of *gîtes* and rooms in private homes, some on the idyllic Ile de la Barthelasse. For one of these, contact the **CDT Vaucluse**, 21 Rue Collège de la Croix, t 04 90 80 47 00, www.vaucluse.fr.

******Hôtel-Restaurant La Mirande**, 4 Place de la Mirande, t 04 90 14 20 20, www.la-mirande.fr (€€€€€). With views of the Popes' Palace through its antique glass windows, *toile de jouty* wallpaper or ancient woodcuts, marble bathrooms and oak floors, this is a luxurious place to stay by any standard. Also offers cooking courses.

******Hôtel d'Europe**, 14 Place Crillon, t 04 90 14 76 76, www.heurope.com (€€€€€–€€€). The oldest hotel in town, built in the 16th century and converted to an inn in the late 18th

century. Classically formal, it has Louis XV furnishings. Napoleon stayed here, as did the eloping Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett. *Restaurant closed Sun and Mon.*

******Clarion Cloître Saint-Louis**, 20 Rue Portail Boquier, t 04 90 27 55 55, www.cloitre-saint-louis.com (€€€€€–€€€). A beautiful cloister built in 1589 as part of a Jesuit school of theology, now an island of tranquillity. Rooms have been modernized for its chain hotel status; meals (€€€) are served under the portico or by the rooftop pool. *Restaurant closed Sat lunch.*

******Hôtel-Restaurant La Ferme**, Ile de la Barthelasse, t 04 90 82 57 53 (€€). A 16th-century farmhouse with rooms ranging in style from traditional Provençal to a Gypsy caravan, set around a tennis court and a swimming pool. *Closed Nov–mid-Mar; restaurant closed lunch.*

****Hôtel du Palais des Papes**, 3 Place du Palais, t 04 90 86 04 13, www.hotel-avignon.com (€€). The hotel with the best views of the palace. There is a restaurant, **Le Lutrin** (€€).

****Hôtel d'Angleterre**, 29 Bd Raspail, t 04 90 86 34 31, www.hoteldangleterre.fr (€€). Friendly, simple place. *Closed mid-Dec–mid-Jan.*

***Le Splendid**, 17 Rue Agricole Perdiguiet, t 04 90 86 14 46, www.avignon-splendid-hotel.com (€€). Good-value option offering bright and comfortable rooms. *Closed mid-Nov–mid-Dec.*

***Mignon**, 12 Rue Joseph Vernet, t 04 90 82 17 30, www.hotel-mignon.com (€€). Bright hotel with small, air-conditioned rooms. *Closed Jan.*

****Saint-Roch**, 9 Rue Paul Mérindol, t 04 90 16 50 00, www.hotelstroch-avignon.com (€). Quiet hotel with a delightful garden, just outside the walls of Porte St-Roch.

Ile de la Barthelasse has four campsites, one of which, **Bagatelle**, t 04 90 86 30 39, www.campingbagatelle.com (€), offers dormitory rooms during the summer months.

Around Avignon

There are two exceptional hotel-restaurants within easy driving distance of Avignon.

******Hostellerie Les Frênes**, 645 Av des Vertes Rives, 84140 Montfavet (5km east of town on N107), t 04 90 31 17 93, www.lesfrenes.com (€€€€€–€€€€). Set around a beautiful garden and pool; antiques furnish the rooms. The food (€€€) is as marvellous as the setting. *Closed Feb.*

******Auberge de Cassagne**, 84130 Le Pontet (5km north of town on N7), t 04 90 31 04 18, www.aubergedecassagne.com (€€€€€–€€€). A plush option with a pool, tennis courts, a sauna and a gym, and access to a golf course. The food and the wine cellar are faultless (€€€€). *Closed Jan.*

Eating Out in Avignon

Christian Etienne, 10 Rue de Mons, t 04 90 86 16 50, www.christian-etienne.fr (€€€€). A very chi-chi but nonetheless popular choice for gourmet Provençal cuisine. *Closed Sun and Mon exc July.*

Hiély-Lucullus, 5 Rue de la République, t 04 90 86 17 07, www.hiely-lucullus.com (€€€). Avignon's gourmet bastion for the past 60 years, and resolutely old-fashioned with a first-floor dining room. The kitchen never disappoints, with dishes such as *tourte* of quail and the legendary *cassoulet de moules aux épinards* (mussel stew with spinach). *Closed Sat lunch.*

Le Petit Bedon, 70 Rue Joseph Vernet, t 04 90 82 33 98 (€€€). An Avignon institution offering well-prepared dishes seldom found elsewhere, such as *lotte au gigondas*, angler fish cooked in wine. *Closed Sun and Mon lunch.*

Le Bain Marie, 5 Rue Pétramale, t 04 90 85 21 37, www.lebainmarie.com (€€€). A popular place serving a range of traditional French fare. *Closed all day Sun, Mon lunch and Sat lunch.*

L'Entrée des Artistes, 1 Place des Carmes, t 04 90 82 46 90 (€€€–€€). A restaurant located in a quiet square, with a menu brimming with traditional Provençal cooking, including *piéd de veau*. *Closed Sat lunch and Sun, plus Aug.*

La Fourchette, 17 Rue Racine, t 04 90 85 20 93 (€€€–€€). Hiély-Lucullus' less expensive sister restaurant, serving

★ **La Ferme** >

★ **Hiély-Lucullus** >>

equally good cuisine at prices that won't bust your wallet. *Closed Sat, Sun, and 3 weeks Aug.*

Woolloomooloo, 16 bis Rue des Teinturiers, t 04 90 85 28 44, www.woolloomooloo.com (€€). A popular place with 'world cuisine' and live music.

Entertainment and Nightlife in Avignon

Outside the Festival

Théâtre du Chêne Noir, 8 bis Rue Ste-Catherine, t 04 90 86 58 11, www.chenenoir.fr. One of Provence's most talented theatre companies.

Théâtre des Carmes, 6 Place des Carmes, t 04 90 82 20 47, www.theatredescarmes.com. Avignon's oldest permanent company, performing in the restored Gothic cloister of the Eglise des Carmes.

AJMI, 4 Rue Escaliers Sainte-Anne, t 04 90 86 08 61, www.jazzalajmi.com. A jazz club with live music on Thurs.

Bars and Clubs

Pub Z, 58 Rue Bonneterie, t 04 90 85 42 84. A black and white bar with DJs.

Le Red Zone, 25 Rue Carnot, t 04 90 27 02 44, www.redzonebar.com. Bar with music.

Villeneuve lez Avignon

In 586, on Puy Andaon, the rock that dominates Villeneuve lez Avignon, a Visigoth princess-hermit named Casarie died in the odour of sanctity (holiness smells like crushed violets, apparently). In the 10th century, Benedictines built the abbey of St-André to shelter her bones and lodge pilgrims on the route to Compostela. St-André grew to become one of the mightiest monasteries in the south of France, and in 1226, when Louis VIII besieged pro-Albigensian Avignon, the abbot offered the king co-sovereignty of the abbey in exchange for royal privileges. And so what was once an abbey town became a frontier-fortress of the king of France, a new town (*ville neuve*), heavily fortified in case the pope over the river should start feeling frisky.

But Villeneuve was soon invaded in another way; wanton, squalid Avignon didn't suit all tastes, and the pope gave permission to his cardinals who preferred it not-so-hot to retreat across the Rhône into princely *livrées cardinalices* (palaces 'freed' from their original owners by the Curia). Though a dormitory suburb these days, Villeneuve still maintains a separate peace, with well-fed cats snoozing in the sun, leisurely afternoons at the *pétanque* court and some amazing works of art.

Around Town

In 1307, when Philip the Fair ratified the deal that made Villeneuve royal property, he ordered that a citadel be built on the approach to Pont St-Bénézet, named after guess who. As times grew more perilous, this bright white **Tour Philippe-le-Bel** was made higher to keep out the riff-raff, and from its terrace, reached by a superb winding stair, it offers splendid views of Avignon, Mont Ventoux and, on a clear day, the Alpilles.

Tour Philippe-le-Bel

t 04 32 70 08 57; open April–Sept 10–12.30 and 2–6.30; Oct–Nov and Mar Tues–Sun 10–12 and 2–5; closed Dec–Feb

Getting to Villeneuve lez Avignon

Bus 11 runs every 30mins from the train station, Porte de l'Oulle or the post office in Avignon to Villeneuve lez Avignon.

Collégiale Notre-Dame

t 06 70 01 22 74; open April–Sept 10–12.30 and 2–6.30; Oct–Nov and Mar Tues–Sun 10–12 and 2–5; closed Dec–Feb

★ Musée Pierre-de-Luxembourg

t 04 90 27 49 66; open April–Sept 10–12.30 and 2–6.30; Oct–Nov and Mar Tues–Sun 10–12 and 2–5; closed Dec–Feb; adm

From here, Montée de la Tour leads up to the 14th-century **Collégiale Notre-Dame**, once the chapel of a *livrée* and now Villeneuve's parish church. From Villeneuve's Chartreuse (charterhouse) it has inherited an elaborate marble altar of 1745, and it contains a copy of Enguerrand Quarton's famous *Pietà de Villeneuve lez Avignon* (the original is in the Louvre). The church's most famous work, a beaming, swivel-hipped, polychrome ivory statue of the Virgin, carved in Paris out of an elephant's tusk c. 1320, has been removed to safer quarters in the nearby **Musée Pierre-de-Luxembourg**, which is housed in yet another *livrée*.

The museum's other prize is the masterpiece of the Avignon school: Enguerrand Quarton's 1454 *Couronnement de la Vierge*, one of the greatest works of 15th-century French painting, commissioned for the Chartreuse (see below). Unusually, it portrays God the Father and God the Son as twins, clothed in sumptuous crimson and gold, like the Virgin herself, whose fine sculptural features were perhaps inspired by the ivory Virgin. Around these central figures the painting evokes the spiritual route travelled by the Carthusians through vigilant prayer, to purify the world and reconcile it to God. St Bruno, founder of the Order, saints, kings and commoners are present, hierarchically arranged, while the landscape encompasses heaven, hell, Rome and Jerusalem, and local touches such as the Montagne Ste-Victoire (see pp.213–14) and the cliffs of L'Estaque (see p.197).

Other notable works in the museum include a curious 14th-century double-faced Virgin, the 'Eve' face evoking original sin and the 'Mary' face human redemption; Simon de Châlon's 1552 *Entombment*; and, amid the uninspired 17th-century fluff, Philippe de Champaigne's *Visitation*.

La Chartreuse and Fort St-André

From the museum, take Rue de la République up as far as No.53, the **Livrée de la Thurroye**, the best-preserved in Villeneuve; a cardinal would maintain a household of 100 or so people here. Further up the street and up the scale rises what used to be the largest and wealthiest charterhouse in France, the **Chartreuse du Val de Bénédiction**. This began life as the *livrée* of Etienne Aubert who, upon his election to the papacy in 1352 as Innocent VI, deeded his palace to the Carthusians for a monastery. For 450 years it was expanded and rebuilt, acquired immense estates on either side of the Rhône from kings and popes, accumulated a precious library,

Chartreuse du Val de Bénédiction

t 04 90 15 24 24; www.chartreuse.org; open April–Sept daily 9–6.30; Oct–Mar daily 9.30–5.30; adm

two more cloisters and various works of art, and in general lived high on the hog by the usual Carthusian standards. In 1792, the Revolution forced the monks out, and the Chartreuse was sold in 17 lots; squatters took over the cells and outsiders feared to enter the cloisters after dark. Now repurchased and beautifully restored, the buildings house the **CNES** (Centre National des Écritures du Spectacle), where playwrights and others are given grants to work in peace and quiet in some of the former cells; it hosts seminars, exhibitions and performances, especially during the Avignon Festival.

Still, the sensation that lingers in the charterhouse is one of vast silences and austerity, the hallmark of an order where conversation was limited (at least at the outset) to one hour a week; monks who disobeyed the rule of prayer, work and silence ended up in one of the seven prison cells that are set around the laundry in the Great Cloister, each with a cleverly arranged window on the prison chapel altar. Explanations (in English) throughout offer an in-depth view of Carthusian life: one cell has been furnished as it originally was. Pierre Boulez discovered that the dining hall, or *tinel*, has some of the finest acoustics in the whole of France, designed so that everyone could hear the monk who read aloud during mealtimes. In the *tinel*'s chapel are some ruined 14th-century frescoes by Matteo Giovannetti and his school: originally their work covered the walls of the huge church, now bare except for their masons' marks and minus its apse, which collapsed. The star attraction here is **Innocent VI's tomb**, which boasts an alabaster effigy under a fine Gothic baldachin. Innocent was solemnly reburied here in 1960: a century ago the tomb was being used as a rabbit hutch. Popes who took the name Innocent have tended to suffer similar posthumous indignities: the great Innocent III was found stark naked in Perugia cathedral, a victim of poisoned slippers, while the corpse of Innocent X – the last of the series – was dumped in a toolshed in St Peter's.

Gazing down into the charterhouse from the summit of Puy Andaon are the formidable bleached walls of **Fort St-André**, built by the French kings around the old abbey in the 1360s, not only to stare down the pope over the river but to defend French turf during the heyday of the *Grandes Compagnies* (bands of unemployed mercenaries who pillaged the countryside and held towns to ransom). The two round towers afford a famous vantage point over Avignon; the southwestern tower is called the **Tour des Masques** (or Tour des Sorcières, or Tour des Fées); no one remembers why. Jumbly ruins are all that remain of the once splendid **Abbaye St-André** amid beautiful Italian gardens – sumptuous in springtime – restored and presided over by Roseline Bacou, a former curator at the Louvre.

Fort St-André

† 04 90 25 45 35; open
mid-May–Sept daily
10–1 and 2–6; April–
mid-May daily 10–1 and
2–5.30; Oct–Mar 10–1
and 2–5

Abbaye St-André

† 04 90 25 55 95; open
April–Sept Tues–Sun
10–12.30 and 2–6,
Oct–Mar Tues–Sun
10–12 and 2–5

Market Days in Villeneuve lez Avignon

Thurs: Place Charles David.

Sat am: Place Jean Jaurès, Provençal market.

Sat am: flea market.

Where to Stay in Villeneuve lez Avignon

Villeneuve lez Avignon

☑ 30400

Villeneuve makes an attractive alternative to Avignon, and has some fine places to stay.

******Le Prieuré**, 7 Place du Chapitre, t 04 90 15 90 15, www.leprieure.com (€€€€€–€€€€). An exquisite, central hotel that gives you the option of sleeping in a 14th-century *livrée*, where the rooms are furnished with antiques, or in the more comfortable annexe by the large swimming pool. Further attractions are its gardens, tennis court and splendid restaurant (€€€€€–€€€€). *Closed Nov–Mar.*

******Hostellerie La Magnaneraie**, 37 Rue Camp-de-Bataille, t 04 90 25 11 11, www.hostellerie-la-magnaneraie.com (€€€€). A Best Western hotel with old-fashioned rooms in a former silkworm nursery, and a modern annexe, plus a swimming pool, gardens and Le Prieuré's rival for the best restaurant in town (€€€€). *Restaurant closed Wed,*

Sat lunch and Sun eve in Nov–April; Sat lunch in summer.

Aux Ecuries des Chartreux, 66 Rue de la République, t 04 90 25 79 93, www.ecuries-des-chartreux.com (€€€–€€). Nicely decorated 17th-century B&B with studios next to the Chartreuse.

****L'Atelier**, 5 Rue de la Foire, t 04 90 25 01 84, www.hoteldelatelier.com (€€). A beautifully restored central 16th-century building with stylishly furnished rooms and a walled garden.

****Les Cèdres**, 39 Av Pasteur Bellevue, t 04 90 25 43 92, www.lescèdres-hotel.fr (€€). A 17th-century building with a swimming pool, restaurant (€€€€–€€) and bungalows. *Closed Nov–Mar; restaurant closed Mon lunch except in July.*

Centre International de Séjour YMCA, 7 bis Chemin de la Justice, t 04 90 25 46 20, www.ymca-avignon.com (€). A hostel with superb views of the Rhône and a pool.

Eating Out in Villeneuve lez Avignon

Aubertin, 1 Rue de l'Hôpital, t 04 90 25 94 84 (€€€). An intimate, popular *restaurant gastronomique* under the porticoes. *Book ahead. Closed Sun, Mon eve, and last week Aug.*

La Maison, 1 Rue Montée-du-Fort, t 04 90 25 20 81 (€€). A friendly old favourite with traditional Provençal food. *Closed Tues, Wed and Aug.*

📍 Villeneuve lez Avignon >

1 Place Charles David, t 04 90 25 61 33, www.villeneuvelezavignon.fr/tourisme; open daily all year; in summer there is also a branch office in the main Avignon tourist office (see p.114).

★ Le Prieuré >

South of Avignon

La Montagnette

Just south of Avignon and its confluence with the Durance, the Rhône curves to accommodate La Montagnette, a micro-region that is still something of a well-kept secret, near the tourist fleshpots of Provence and yet distant in spirit, self-contained and serene. La Montagnette itself is a striking, 10km-long outcrop of white stone, isolated from its sisters in the Alpilles and surrounded by orchards, a bijou landscape that **Barbentane** fits into like an old shoe. This friendly old town, which so loved its *farandole* that a man who could not dance it was not considered a fit husband, is

Barbentane Château

t 04 90 95 51 07;
open July–Sept daily
10–12 and 2–6; April–
June and Oct Mon, Tues
and Thurs–Sun 10–12
and 2–6; Nov and 16
Feb–Mar Sun 10–12
and 2–6; closed Dec–
15 Feb; adm

Abbaye St-Michel- de-Frigolet

t 04 90 95 70 07,
www.frigolet.com; open
daily 7–12 and 1.30–6;
guided tours available
for groups by appt, and
on Sun at 4pm for
individuals; adm; you
can also stay here,
see p.125

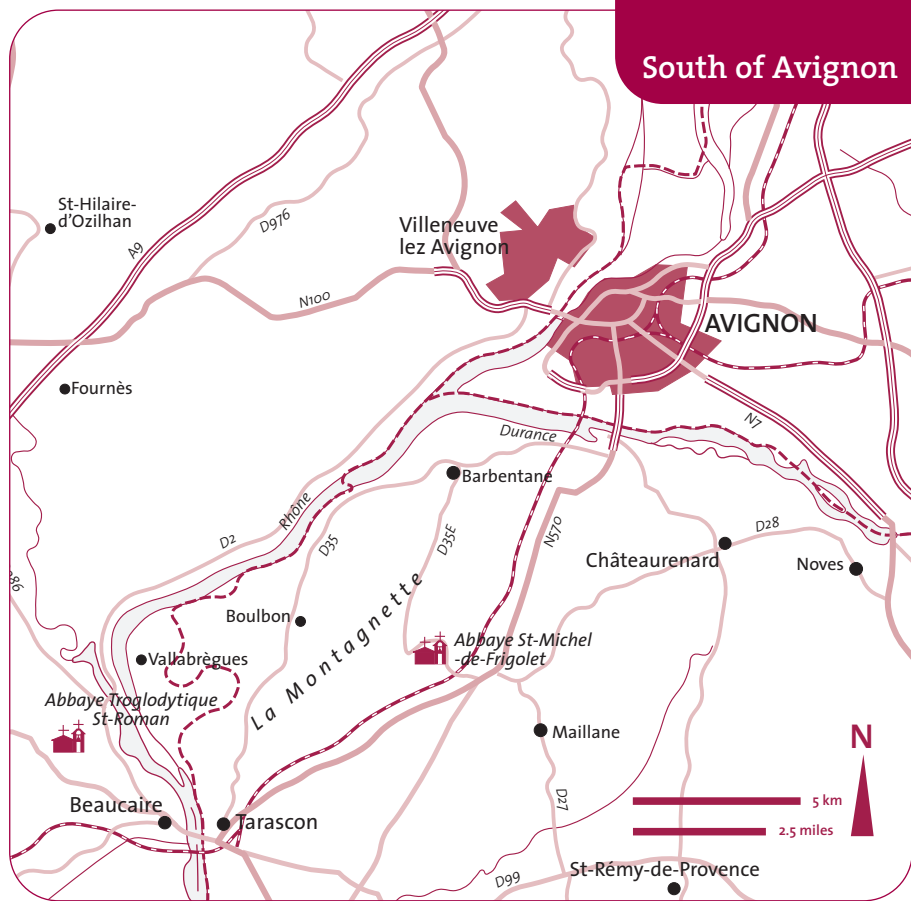
still defended by the 14th-century **Tour Angelica**, its medieval gates and, near the church, the arcaded Renaissance **Maison des Chevaliers**. Outside the walls, the **château** was built in 1674, not for defence but for pleasure, by the Marquis de Barbentane, the king's ambassador to Tuscany. It would not look out of place in the Ile de France: the furnishings are Louis XV and Louis XVI, but the builder's Italian tastes permeate the other decoration. The enormous plane trees in the garden were brought over from Turkey by an earlier marquis in the 1670s.

On the D35 south of Barbentane, **Boulbon** was known as Bourbon until 1792, when the guillotine cut into the name's popularity. Still defended by its fairytale 10th-century walls built dramatically into and onto the rocky escarpment overlooking the Rhône, Boulbon is known for its unique 1 June *Cérémonie du St-Vinage*, in honour of its patron saint Marcellin: the men of the village each bring a full bottle of wine to the saint's Romanesque chapel and hear the Gospel in Provençal, after which the wine is blessed and God is toasted with a mighty swig. The bottle is then corked and for the rest of the year the blessed wine is used as a remedy for illnesses.

Leaving Barbentane on the D35E will bring you to the **Abbaye St-Michel-de-Frigolet**, founded around 1000. The word *frigolet* comes from the Provençal *férigoulo*, or thyme; this invigorating herb scents the air of La Montagnette. The monks of Montmajour (see p.142), enervated by the swamps, would come up here for a *cure* – some of it in the form of a liqueur called *Elixir du Révérend Père Gaucher*, still distilled and on sale here. It may also have an effect on sterility: in 1632, Anne of Austria, barren after 20 years of marriage, prayed in the Romanesque **Chapelle de la Conception Immaculée** for a son, and soon after gave the world Louis XIV. In gratitude, she sent the gilt *boiseries* framing 14 turgid Mignards. Another celebrity to pass through was young Frédéric Mistral, for whom the stories and customs of these hills were to become a powerful source of inspiration.

The Petite Crau

East of Barbentane and La Montagnette, **Châteaurenard** is one of Provence's main wholesale fruit and vegetable markets, a big, bustling place under its plane trees. It lords over the rich, verdant plain of the **Petite Crau**, a large marshland drained by the Romans, planted with market gardens and orchards of cherries and apricots, and protected from the huffing and puffing of the *mistral* by hedgerows and poplars – nothing at all like the rocky waste of the 'big' Crau. Two proud **towers** on Châteaurenard's hill are all that remain of the castle that first belonged to Reinardus, a friend and ally of Charles Martel, who was killed below its walls fighting the



Tour du Griffon

tours May–Sept Tues–Sat
10–12 and 2.30–6.30, Sun
2.30–6.30; Oct–April
Sat–Thurs 3–5; adm

Musée des Outils Agraires

t 04 90 90 11 59; open
May–Sept Tues–Sat
10–12 and 2.30–6.30,
Sun 2.30–6.30; closed
Oct–April; adm

Musée Frédéric Mistral

t 04 90 95 74 06; open
April–Sept Tues–Sun
9.30–11.30 and 2.30–
6.30, Oct–Mar Tues–Sun
10–11.30 and 2–4.30; adm

Saracens; his wife Emma took over the command and fought bravely, keeping the enemy at bay, then died of a broken heart. Her ghost haunts the **Tour du Griffon**, which contains the **Musée des Outils Agraires**. Just east of Châteaurenard, **Noves** claims to have been the home, or summer residence, of Petrarch's Laura: you can see her supposed house.

In 1830, Mistral was born in **Maillane**, southwest of Châteaurenard, and spent as much time as possible there. It's been bypassed by the main routes, leaving a quaint, dusty nowhere with two old-fashioned bars, dogs sleeping in the middle of the streets, and a *tabac* selling keychains sporting Mistral's mug – the only noticeable effort by the locals to cash in on their Nobel Prize slinging hero (he does look like Buffalo Bill).

The house the master Félibre had built after 1876 is now the **Musée Frédéric Mistral** – don't mistake it for the rotting concrete Centre F. Mistral, which is something else. Preserved as it was the

Market Days South of Avignon

Barbentane: Fri am.

Where to Stay and Eat South of Avignon

Barbentane ☑ 13570

****Hôtel Castel Mouisson**, at foot of La Montagnette in Quartier Castel Mouisson, t 04 90 95 51 17, www.hotel-castelmouisson.com (€€–€). A typical Provençal hotel, with a swimming pool and tennis court, and bike hire. *Closed mid-Oct–mid-Mar.*

Le Saint-Jean, 1 Le Cours, t 04 90 15 45 22 (€). Decent rooms in the centre and a restaurant (€€) with average fare. *Restaurant closed Wed, plus Xmas and New Year.*

Châteaurenard ☑ 13160

****Les Glycines**, 14 Av Victor Hugo, t 04 90 94 10 66 (€). A simple base with an average restaurant (€€). *Restaurant closed Sun eve and Mon.*

Noves ☑ 13550

******Auberge de Noves**, 2km north-west of town on D28, t 04 90 24 28 28, www.aubergedenoves.com (€€€€€–€€€€). A Relais & Châteaux *bastide* converted into one of the most prestigious Provençal hotels with heli-pad and lobster pools in a 15-hectare forest. The air-conditioned rooms have every comfort, and there are tennis courts and a swimming pool in the grounds, and riding and golf nearby. The restaurant (€€€€–€€€) is a gastro-temple. *Restaurant closed Sat lunch, plus Sun eve and Mon in winter.*

📍 Barbentane >

4 Cours J-B Rey,
t 04 90 90 85 86,
www.barbentane.fr;
open summer Mon–Sat;
winter Mon–Fri
and Sat am

day he died in 1914, the house is ‘as sympathetic and as cosy as a coffin,’ as author James Pope-Hennessy described it. The guide won’t let you in until the tour begins, and then his high-speed spiel won’t be stopped. If you do interrupt, he’ll forget where he is and have to start again. There are no concessions to non-French speakers.

Mistral’s tomb, in the ghostly, gravelly graveyard over the road, is modelled after the Pavillon de la Reine Jeanne near Les Baux-de-Provence (see p.140), and decorated with a seven-pointed star and other Félibre symbols. If you can, leave Maillane southwards by the D27, and travel over beautiful fields and streams.

Tarascon

Few towns in Provence are as determinedly unglamorous as Tarascon. Most of the houses are not only unrestored but cry out for a lick of paint, and garages outnumber craft shops. Meanwhile, the rival fairytale castles of Tarascon and Beaucaire muse at each other across the Rhône like the embodiments of a bicomunal Walter Mitty daydream, reminders of heroism, romance, international markets, man-eating monsters and Alphonse Daudet’s buffoonish anti-hero Tartarin, who never told a lie but, under the hot sun, was prone to imagine things. Provençal nationalists accuse Daudet (a native of Nîmes) of creating a stereotype that only heightened Paris’ already smug attitude

Getting to and around Tarascon

By Train

Nearly every east–west train between towns in Provence and Languedoc stops in Tarascon.

By Bus

Société des Transports Départementaux du Gard buses run regularly between Tarascon, Nîmes and Avignon (t 04 66 29 27 29); **CTM**, from Tarascon station, go to Arles and Avignon (t 04 90 93 74 90).

towards the Midi, to which Daudet replied that ‘All Frenchmen have in them a touch of Tarascon.’

Tarascon and St Martha

All centuries have quirks that seem quaint to later generations: tulip-bulb speculation in the 18th, ladies’ bustles in the 19th, muzak in the 20th. In the 11th and 12th centuries it was a mania for the body parts of saints – a fad so passionate that a sure candidate for the inner circle, such as St Francis, had bodyguards in his dying days to stop rival towns kidnapping him. If it had no fresh relics, every town with a saintly legend linked to it began digging for bones; and in Tarascon, *voilà*, in 1187 they just happened to stumble across the relics of St Martha.

The 9th-century legend told how she found Tarascon bedevilled by the Tarasque, a man-eating amphibian whose ancestors are portrayed in Celtic sculpture chomping on human heads. Martha neatly tidied away the monster by showing it a cross, lassoing it with her girdle, then ordering it to the bottom of the Rhône, never to return. The new-found relics attracted so many pilgrims that the 12th-century **Collégiale Ste-Marthe** was enlarged in the 13th and 16th centuries into a curious Romanesque-Gothic hybrid.

The church was bombed in the Second World War, but worse mischief had been done earlier, in the Revolution, when the great south portal of 1197 was shorn of its sculptures. Nowadays, the chapels of the attractive five-aisled Gothic nave are filled with the lukewarm efforts of Mignard and Parrocel, masters of the Baroque fruitcake style, while in the crypt (part of the original church) there’s a king-sized statue of Martha from 1400, and the slightly later *Effigy of Jean de Cossa*, seneschal of Provence, which is attributed to Francesco Laurana.

Château du Roi René

Rooted in a limestone rock over the Rhône, Tarascon’s château gleams like white satin between the sun and the water. It’s a storybook feudal castle with crenellations and a moat, named after the one character in Tarascon’s history who was actually rounded out in flesh and blood. The Bon Roi René earned the ‘Good’ in his

Château du Roi René

t 04 90 91 01 93;
open April–Aug daily
10–6.30; Sept–Mar
Tues–Sun 10.30–5; adm

name for his good appetite and fondness for the good things of life, as well as for having the good sense not to let troubles or sorrows, of which he had many, get under his skin. He spent the last decade of his life (1471–80) surrounded by poets and artists in Tarascon, in this castle begun in 1401 by his father, Louis II of Anjou. After René's death and Provence's annexation to France, it underwent the usual conversion into a prison.

While the exterior is all business, the interior was designed with the good taste of René in mind – it's flamboyant and elegant, and now eloquently empty except for ten 17th-century tapestries on the *Life of Scipio* and a collection of 18th-century pharmaceutical pots. In the courtyard there are busts of the king and his second wife, Jeanne de Laval; here and there, sculptural titbits and faded ceiling panels offer clues to the original decoration. Graffiti by British sailors imprisoned here between 1754 and 1778 recalls the castle's later use.

Taking in the precipitous views from the top, you can see why no one ever tried to sneak up on it; and why, during the Revolution, Tarascon never needed to invest in a guillotine.

Elsewhere around Town

Perhaps because they haven't been prettified to death as in some Provençal towns, the streets of Tarascon, lined with rose, lemon and ochre houses with geraniums in the windows and laundry flapping in the breeze, make it a delightful place to wander around. The main **Rue des Halles** is still covered by medieval arcades.

Halfway up it from the tourist office you'll find the Franciscan **Cloître des Cordeliers** (1450s), now open only for special exhibitions. At the top of Rue des Halles stands the handsome **Hôtel de Ville** (1648) – compare it with Beaucaire's, built 35 years later; the ceilings and original consuls' stalls are still intact.

Near here, at 39 Rue Proudhon, the **Musée Souleiado** is run by Souleiado (Provençal for 'sunray piercing through clouds'), France's leading manufacturer of block-printed textiles. Founded here in 1938 by Charles Deméry in the hopes of reviving a 200-year-old Tarascon industry, the museum holds 40,000 18th-century fruitwood blocks – still the basis for all the company's patterns. Brought back to fashion in the 1950s on such diverse backs as Bardot's and Picasso's, Souleiado's colour-drenched prints can be purchased in the nearby shop, or in the many boutiques in the south of France.

Lastly, there's the so-called **Maison de Tartarin** at 55 bis Boulevard Itam. The modern Tarasconnais say they have forgiven Alphonse Daudet for making them ridiculous, for in the age of Tourist Man he has also made them famous. Daudet claimed that the character

Cloître des Cordeliers

t 04 90 91 38 71

Musée Souleiado

t 04 90 91 50 11; open
May–Sept daily 10–6;
Oct–April Tues–Sat 10–1
and 2–6; adm

Maison de Tartarin

t 04 90 91 05 08; open
July and Aug Mon, Tues
and Thurs–Sat 9.30–12
and 2–7; April–June and
Sept Mon, Tues, Thurs
and Fri 9.30–12 and 2–7;
Oct Tues, Thurs and Fri
9–12 and 1.30–7; closed
Nov–Mar; adm

of Tartarin was derived from his cousin, a big-game hunter whom he accompanied on a lion hunt in Algeria, but there's another version: in the original story, published as a newspaper serial, Tartarin was named Barbarin after an old Tarasconnais family, the head of which had rejected the author's suit for the hand of his daughter. The family threatened to sue if Daudet used their name in his novel, so he changed it to the fictional Tartarin, then got his own back by making the whole town the butt of his jokes. In the house are mementoes from the three Tartarin novels, and photos from the plays and films. The garden has been planted to fit the book's exotic flora and baobab tree, where Tartarin held court with his tall tales.

Also on display is the famous **Tarasque**, a moustachioed armadillo covered with red spikes. Scholars argue whether the monster is named after the town or vice versa; when King René founded the *Jeux et courses de la Tarasque* in 1474, it was given a thick carapace to hide the men that made it walk, while fireworks blasted dramatically out of its nostrils and the people sang '*Lagadigadèu, la Tarasco, Lagadigadèu! Leisses la passa, La vieio Mascol!*' or 'Let her pass, the Tarasque, let her dance.'

Market Days in Tarascon

Tues am: Provençal market, Place de Verdun.

Fri: Mediterranean market, Place du Marché.

Festivals in Tarascon

The *Fête de la Tarasque* lasts for 5 days around St John's Day (24 June), and includes a procession headed by a reconstruction of the Tarasque, bonfires, costumes, bullfights, an opera (the *Mireio*), dances, cavalcades and – yes – someone dressed up as Tartarin.

Where to Stay and Eat in Tarascon

i Tarascon >

16 Bd Itam, t 04 90 91 03 52, www.tarascon.org; open June–Sept Mon–Sat and Sun am; Oct–May Mon–Sat

Tarascon ✉ 13150

*****Hôtel Les Mazets des Roches**, Route de Fontvieille (D33), t 04 90 91 34 89, www.mazets-des-roches.com (€€€–€€). A quiet, comfortable place with modern, air-conditioned rooms in a large park of tall pines, with a

restaurant (€€), pool, tennis courts and bike rental. *Closed Nov–Mar; restaurant closed Thurs lunch and Sat lunch.*

*****Hôtel de Provence**, 7 Bd Victor Hugo, t 04 90 91 06 43, www.hotel-provence-tarascon.com (€€€–€€). A *hôtel particulier* in the centre, with large rooms and a restaurant (€€).

****Le Terminus**, Place du Colonel Berrurier, t 04 90 91 18 95 (€). A fairly basic sleeping option, with a buffet restaurant offering 16 starters and 10 main dishes. *Closed Mon lunch in winter.*

Hôtel-Restaurant Saint-Michel, Abbaye St-Michel-de-Frigolet (*see* p.120), t 04 90 90 52 70, www.frigolet.com (€). A hotel run by the Prémontré monks, with rooms and a restaurant (€€), offering guaranteed quiet. *Closed 2 weeks Dec, Jan–Feb; restaurant closed Mon and Tues.* There is also a separate retreat, but you will sleep in a cell and must attend services.

Auberge de Jeunesse, 31 Bd Gambetta, t 04 90 91 04 08, www.fuaj.org/tarascon (€). A hostel offering inexpensive food and bike hire. *Closed mid-Oct–mid-Mar.*

Bistrot des Anges, 20 Place du Marché, building located in a lively part of town. Dinner is available at the weekends. *Closed Sun except during festivals.*
 t 04 90 91 05 11 (€). A great place for lunch or snacks, with well-priced salads and tarts, in a nicely decorated

Beaucaire

Beaucaire can match Tarascon's stories tit for tat. It, too, was plagued by a river monster, called the **Drac** – a dragon in some versions, or a handsome young man – who liked to stroll invisibly through Beaucaire, before luring his victims into the Rhône by holding a bright jewel just below the surface. When the Drac became a father, he kidnapped a washerwoman to nurse his baby for seven years, during which time the woman learned how to see him when he was invisible. Years later, during one of his prowls through Beaucaire, she saw him and greeted him loudly. He was so mortified that he was never seen again, although like the Tarasque he makes an annual reappearance by proxy, on the first weekend in June.

Beaucaire was also the setting of one of the most charming medieval romances: of **Aucassin**, son of the count of Beaucaire, and his 'sweet sister friend' **Nicolette**, daughter of the king of Carthage, whom Aucassin loved so dizzily that he fell off his horse and dislocated his shoulder, among other adventures.

But in those days Beaucaire was on everyone's lips. It was here, in 1208, that a local squire assassinated Pope Innocent III's legate, who had come to demand stricter measures against the Cathars. It gave Innocent the excuse he needed to launch the **Albigensian Crusade** against Beaucaire's overlords in Toulouse, and all their lands in Languedoc. In 1216, when the war was in full swing, Raymond VII, the son of the count of Toulouse, recaptured the town from its French occupiers, who took refuge in the castle. As soon as word reached Simon de Montfort, he set off in person to succour his stranded men and to teach Beaucaire a lesson, besieging the town walls, while his troops took up the fight from inside the castle, so that Beaucaire was sandwiched in a double attack. The siege lasted 13 weeks before the troops in the castle ran out of food and surrendered and Simon de Montfort had to admit to one of his very few defeats. In gratitude, Raymond VI granted Beaucaire the right to hold a duty-free fair. But five years later the town was gobbled up by France along with the rest of Languedoc.

In 1464, Louis XI restored its freedoms and fair franchise; before long its *Foire de la Ste-Madeleine* became one of the biggest in western Europe. For 10 days in July, merchants from all over the

Mediterranean, Germany and England would wheel and deal in the *pré*, a vast meadow on the banks of the Rhône; by the 18th century, when the fair was at its height, Beaucaire (with a population of 8,000) attracted some 300,000 traders, as well as acrobats, thieves and sweethearts, who came to buy each other rings of spun glass as a symbol of love's fragile beauty. So much money changed hands that Beaucaire earned as much in a week as Marseille did in a year.

The loss of Beaucaire's duty-free privileges just after Napoleon lost at Waterloo put an end to the fair, and since then Beaucaire has had to make do with traffic on the Rhône and Rhône-Sète Canal, its quarries and its wine, ranging from good plonk to the more illustrious AOC Costière du Gard. But in the spring you can try one last legacy of the great fair in Beaucaire: the *pastissoun*, a patty filled with preserved fruits, introduced by merchants from the Levant. Nowadays Beaucaire is slightly down on its luck – roadworks occupy the main streets and driving and walking are not a pleasure.

The Château and Historic Centre

Louis XI's restoration of Beaucaire's rights paid off for a later Louis (XIII); in 1632, when the **château** was besieged by the troops of the king's rebellious brother, Gaston d'Orléans, the loyal citizens forced them out. To prevent further mishaps, Richelieu ordered Beaucaire's castle razed to the ground. But after the south wall had been demolished, the shell was left to fall into ruins romantic enough for an illustration to *Aucassin et Nicolette*. It's a fitting background to **Les Aigles de Beaucaire**, displays of the falconer's art in Roman costume. There are sweeping views of the Rhône and the old fairgrounds, the Champ de Foire, from the 80ft **Tour Polygonale**.

In the castle gardens below, the **Musée Municipal Auguste Jacquet** has finds from Roman Beaucaire (then clumsily called Ugernum), including a fine statue of Jupiter on his throne, and another of the lusty Priapus found in a villa. There's a geological collection, popular arts, and advertising posters and mementos from the fair, when thousands of brightly coloured cloths swung over the streets, each bearing a merchant's name, his home address and his address in Beaucaire; it was the only way in the vast, polyglot throng to find anyone.

From the château, arrows point the way to the venerable **Place de la République**, shaded by giant plane trees, and the grand, elegant Baroque church of **Notre-Dame-des-Pommiers** (1744), which perhaps more than anything proves how many annual visitors this town once expected. It replaced a much smaller Romanesque

Les Aigles de Beaucaire

t 04 66 59 26 72;
www.aigles-de-beaucaire.com; open mid-end Mar, Sept, Oct Thurs–Tues 2.30–4.30; April, May and June Thurs–Tues 2–4.30; July and Aug Thurs–Tues 3–5; closed Wed and Nov–mid-Mar; adm

Musée Municipal Auguste Jacquet

t 04 66 59 47 61; open July–Aug Wed–Mon 10–12 and 2–7.15; April–June Wed–Mon 10–12 and 2.15–6.15; Sept–Oct Wed–Mon 10–12 and 2–6; Nov–Mar Wed–Mon 10–12 and 2–5.15; closed Tues; adm

i Beaucaire >>

24 Cours Gambetta,
t 04 66 59 26 57,
www.ot-beaucaire.fr;
open July Mon–Sat and
Sun am; Easter–June
and Aug–Sept Mon–Sat;
Oct–Easter Mon–Fri;
guided tours in English

★ Les

Doctrinaires >>

Market Days in Beaucaire

Beaucaire: Thurs am and Sun am, Place de la Mairie and Cours Gambetta; Fri eves in July and Aug there's a market along the canal, with local produce, crafts and entertainment.

Where to Stay and Eat in Beaucaire

For a real escape from the hustle and bustle, why not hire a houseboat and make the leisurely loop down the Rhône–Sète canal to the Camargue, west to Aigues-Mortes and up the Languedoc canal past St-Gilles to Beaucaire? To book, you can contact **Connoisseur Cruisers**, 14 Quai de la Paix, t 04 66 59 46 08, UK t 0870 160 5648, www.connoisseurfloat.com.

The tourist office can also provide lists of *chambres d'hôtes*.

Beaucaire ☑ 30300

*****Les Doctrinaires**, 6 Quai du Général de Gaulle, t 04 66 59 23 70, www.hoteldoctrinaires.com (€€€). A rather old-fashioned hostelry set in the former home of the Doctrinaire fathers of Avignon before the Revolution. The restaurant (€€€–€€), which in summer is set in the hotel's pretty courtyard, is a very pleasant place in which to have a meal. *Closed Sat lunch, and mid-Dec–mid-Jan.*

*****Robinson**, 2km north of town on Route de Remoulins (D986), t 04 66 59 21 32, www.hotel-robinson.fr (€€). Thirty rooms set in acres of countryside, with a swimming pool, tennis court, playground and restaurant (€€). *Closed Feb.*

church but conserves, on its exterior transept wall (facing Rue Charlier), a superb 12th-century frieze depicting Passion scenes in the same strong, lively relief as at St-Gilles (see pp.166–8).

The stately French classical **Hôtel de Ville** (1683) situated in Place Georges Clemenceau, was designed by Jacques Cubizol and bestowed on Beaucaire by Louis XIV, who wanted to provide it with a monument worthy of its importance: note Louis' sun symbols on the façade, the town's coat of arms set in the Collar of St Michael (the French equivalent of the Order of the Garter – Beaucaire was the only town in France awarded the honour), and Beaucaire's motto: 'Renowned for its Fair, Illustrious for its Fidelity'.

If it's a holiday, there's likely to be some dramatic bull follies in the **Arènes**: 100 bulls are brought in for the *Estivales*, a week-long re-creation of the medieval market and other celebrations in late July. Beaucaire's *razeteurs* have a reputation as the most daring of them all; statues of Clairon and Goya, the bulls that gave them the best sport, greet visitors respectively by the Rhône bridge and in Place Jean Jaurès.

Le Vieux Mas

t 04 66 59 60 13; open
July–Aug daily 10–7;
April–June and Sept
daily 10–6; Oct–Mar
Wed, Sat, Sun and hols
1.30–6; adm

Around Beaucaire

The outskirts of Beaucaire are home to two attractions. **Le Vieux Mas**, 8km south on the road to Fourques, is a living evocation of a Provençal farmhouse at the turn of the 19th century, complete

Mas Gallo Romain des Tourelles

t 04 66 59 19 72;
www.tourelles.com;
open April–June and
Sept–Oct daily 2–6; July
and Aug Mon–Sat 10–12
and 2–7, Sun 2–7;
Nov–Mar Sat 2–6, other
days by appt

with a working blacksmith and other artisans to view at their labour, plus farm animals dotted around, and regional products to buy and take home.

The **Mas Gallo Romain des Tourelles**, 4km southwest at 4294 Route de Bellegarde, is more original: since 1983 archaeologists have been working on the 210-acre vineyard of the Château des Tourelles (which has been owned by the Durands for 250 years), excavating a huge 1st-century AD agricultural estate that produced olives, wheat and wine, complete with a vast and efficient pottery factory capable of producing 4,000 amphorae a day.

The current Durand in charge, Hervé, became so fascinated with the digs that, together with the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, he has recreated a Gallo-Roman winery – during the harvest you can watch the grapes as they are gathered and pressed in the old Roman way and later see the wine bottled, or rather amphora-ed, in jars ranging in size from 5 to 1,000 litres, wrapped in straw to keep them from breaking in transit. You can taste and buy the result, although there's really no way of knowing how close it comes to the stuff quaffed by Nero and company – the Romans added lime, egg whites, plaster, clay, mushroom ashes and pig blood to 'improve' their wines, and Durand, thankfully, does not.

Beaucaire's Roman incarnation made its living transferring goods (including its wine) along the Roman 'superhighway', the **Via Domitia** that linked Rome to Spain. An 8km stretch of this ancient roadway has come through in remarkably good nick, especially in a place known as **Les Bornes Milliaires** (take the D999 1km northwest past the train tracks, turn left and continue for 800m, following the Enclos d'Argent lane). Nowhere else along the route have the milestones survived so well: these three, on the 13th mile between Nîmes and Ugernum, were erected by Augustus, Tiberius and Antoninus Pius.

In the same area, the unique and vaguely spooky **Abbaye Troglodytique Saint-Roman de l'Aiguille**, 4km up the D999, was founded in a cave during the perilous 5th century and was laboriously carved out of the living rock. It was mentioned in the chronicles in 1363, when Pope Urban V made it a *studium*, a school open even to the poorest children; but by 1537 it had lost its importance and was engulfed in the construction of a fortress. When the fortress in turn lost its importance in the 19th century and was destroyed, the abbey was rediscovered: you can see the chapel, with its remarkable abbot's chair; the subterranean cells; the water cisterns and wine press; and 150 rock-cut tombs in the necropolis on the upper terrace, from where the dead monks had better views than the live ones down below.

Abbaye Troglodytique Saint-Roman de l'Aiguille

t 04 66 59 19 72,
www.abbaye-saint-roman.com; open daily
April–June and Sept
10–6; July and Aug
10–6.30; Oct–Mar Sat
and Sun 2–5; adm

**Musée de la
Vannerie et de
l'Artisanat**

t 04 66 59 48 14; open
Easter–Oct daily 3–7;
Nov–Easter by appt
only; adm

Northeast of Beaucaire, **Vallabrègues**, ‘the most Provençal town of Languedoc’, was cut off from the rest of the Gard when the Rhône changed its bed. Surrounded by clumps of osier, it makes its living from wicker and basketry: learn all about the long-standing local craft in the interesting **Musée de la Vannerie et de l'Artisanat**.