

Provence



Provence conjures up images of rolling lavender fields, blue skies, gorgeous villages, wonderful food and superb wine – most people’s idea of a perfect holiday. It certainly delivers on all those fronts, but what many visitors don’t expect is Provence’s incredible diversity.

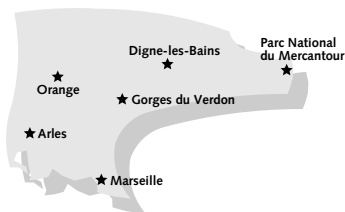
The Vaucluse and Luberon regions epitomise the Provençal cliché, but head south to the Alpilles with its craggy villages and olive groves and the light begins to change, a prelude to Camargue’s bleached landscapes. It is this slanting, luminous air of southern Provence that has captivated so many illustrious painters, the likes of van Gogh, Cézanne and Gauguin. It’s likely you will be smitten, too.

Further east, the spectacular Gorges du Verdon – with their 800m sheer-drop cliffs – set the scene for northeastern Provence’s unspoilt wilderness, a divine mix of Alpine peaks, exceptional sunshine (in excess of 300 days a year) and Provençal flavours. The undisputed king of this little-explored wonderland is the majestic Parc National du Mercantour, with 3000m-plus summits, rare fauna and flora and thousands of unique prehistoric stone carvings.

It’s amazing to think that this outstanding natural setting is headed by one of France’s most explosive cities, sultry and intoxicating Marseille. In fact, you can rave just as much about Provence’s cities – be it Avignon, Marseille, Aix-en-Provence or Arles – as you can about its countryside. In fact, the latter three won the French nominations to be European Capital of Culture in 2013, proof if it ever were needed that Provence is much more than lavender fields and eternal sunshine.

HIGHLIGHTS

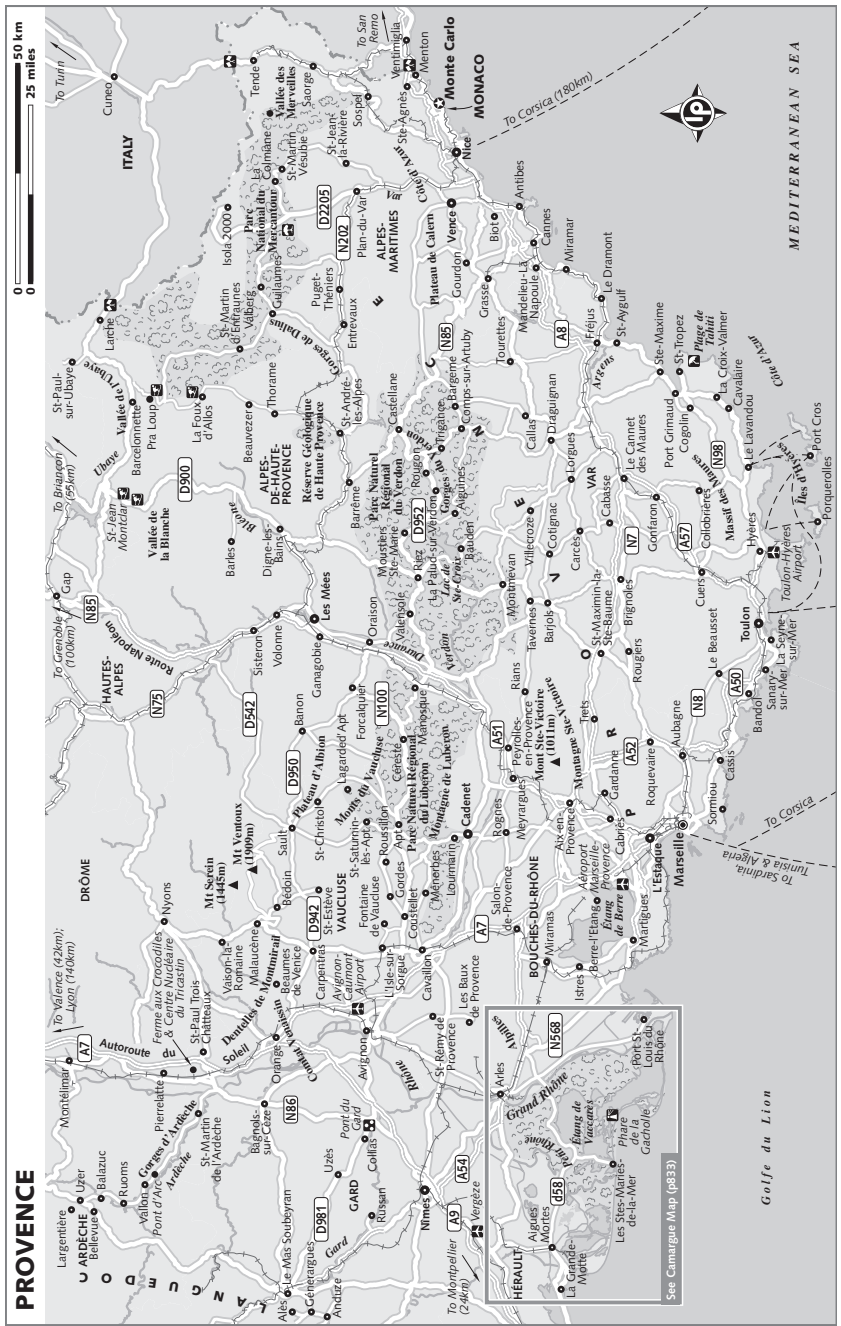
- Soak up seething, heady **Marseille** (p805)
- Trail **van Gogh** (p829) around Arles, visiting spots where he painted some of his best-known canvases
- Canoe, canyon, raft or float down the vertigo-inducing **Gorges du Verdon** (p854)
- Take a walk on the wild side in the stunning, remote valleys of the **Parc National du Mercantour** (p858)
- Watch an opera at Orange’s exceptional **Roman Theatre** (p845) on a balmy summer night
- Retrace the dinosaur’s steps, literally, as you admire ammonites and prehistoric bird footprints at Digne-les-Bains’ **Réserve Géologique** (p856)



■ POPULATION: 2,603,500

■ AREA: 25,851 SQ KM

PROVENCE



See Camargue Map (8833)

History

Settled over the centuries variously by the Ligurians, the Celts and the Greeks, the area between the Alps, the sea and the Rhône River flourished following Julius Caesar's conquest in the mid-1st century BC. The Romans called the area *Provincia Romana*, which evolved into the name Provence. After the collapse of the Roman Empire in the late 5th century, Provence was invaded several times, by the Visigoths, Burgundians and Ostrogoths. The Arabs – who held the Iberian Peninsula and parts of France – were defeated in the 8th century.

During the 14th century, the Catholic Church – under a series of French-born popes – moved its headquarters from feud-riven Rome to Avignon, thus beginning the most resplendent period in the city's (and region's) history. Provence became part of France in 1481, but Avignon and Carpentras remained under papal control until the Revolution.

From the 12th to the 14th centuries, Provençal was the literary language of France, northern Spain and Italy, and the language of the medieval troubadours who romanticised courtly love in poems and melodies.

A movement for the revival of Provençal literature, culture and identity began in the mid-19th century, spearheaded by the poet Frédéric Mistral (1830–1914), recipient of the Nobel Prize for literature in 1904 (the region's furious 100km/h winds are named after him). In recent years the language has undergone a further revival, and in some areas signs are written in Provençal and French.

Getting There & Away

Thanks to the TGV, you can travel from Paris to Aix-en-Provence (three hours), Arles (four hours), Avignon (2¾ hours) and Marseille (three hours). On Saturdays in July and August, there's a direct Eurostar service from London to Avignon (p843). Aéroport Marseille-Provence (p818) is served by a smorgasbord of carriers. Ferries sail from Marseille to Sardinia, Tunisia and Corsica (p818).

MARSEILLE REGION

MARSEILLE

pop 826,700

There was a time when Marseille was the butt of French jokes and on the receiving end of some pretty bad press. No longer. The *cité phocéenne*

has made an unprecedented comeback, undergoing a vast makeover. The results of her new self look rather fabulous: witness the Panier quarter, the new République neighbourhood with its swanky boutiques and Haussmannian buildings, the city's shiny new tram line, and, by 2010, the brand new docks and marina around the famous stripy Cathédrale de la Major.

Marseillais will tell you that the city's rough-and-tumble edginess is part of its charm and that, for all its flaws, it is a very endearing place. They're absolutely right: Marseille grows on you with its unique history, fusion of cultures, souklike markets, millennia-old port and corniches (coastal roads) chicaning around rocky inlets, coves and sun-baked beaches.

And then, of course, there are the Marseillais themselves, far too modest to ever admit that they are part of what makes Marseille so endearing: the accent, the warmth, the honesty, the Mediterranean flair. Marcel Pagnol really had it down to a *t*. And the ultimate vindication that Marseille no longer plays second fiddle to any other French city came in the form of its selection as European Capital of Culture in 2013.

History

Around 600 BC, Greek mariners founded Massilia, a trading post, at what is now Marseille's Vieux Port (Old Port). In the 1st century BC, the city lost out by backing Pompey the Great rather than Julius Caesar – Caesar's forces captured Massilia in 49 BC and directed Roman trade elsewhere. Massilia stayed a free port, remaining the last Western centre of Greek learning before falling into ruin. The city was revived in the early 10th century by the counts of Provence.

Marseille became part of France in the 1480s, but retained its rebellious streak. Its citizens embraced the Revolution, sending 500 volunteers to defend Paris in 1792. Heading north, they sang a rousing march, ever after dubbed 'La Marseillaise' – now the national anthem. Trade with North Africa escalated after France occupied Algeria in 1830, and the 1869 opening of the Suez Canal. During WWII Marseille was bombed by the Germans and Italians (in 1940), and the Allies (in 1943–44).

Postwar years brought with them a steady flow of migration from North Africa and the rapid expansion of Marseille's periphery. Today, Marseille is an important Mediterranean port at the centre of the new

MARSEILLE

A

B

C

D

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

- Bas Fort St-Nicolas.....1 C4
 Basilique Notre Dame de la Garde 2 E6
 Fort St-Jean.....3 C4
 Musée des Beaux-Arts.....(see 4)
 Palais de Longchamp.....4 H1

SLEEPING

- Hôtel Le Richelieu.....5 B5
 Hôtel Péron.....6 A5
 Le Ryad.....7 G3
 Sofitel Marseille Vieux Port.....8 C4

EATING

- Chez Fonfon.....9 A6
 Chez Jeannot.....10 A6
 Péron.....11 A5
 Prado Market.....(see 14)

DRINKING

- Au Petit Nice.....12 G3

ENTERTAINMENT

- L'Intermédiaire.....13 G4

SHOPPING

- Prado Market.....14 G6

TRANSPORT

- Bus Stop.....15 G6
 Passenger Ferry Terminal
 Gare Maritime).....16 C2
 SNCF Ferries Office.....17 C2

To Corsica;
 Sardinia;
 Tunisia;
 Algeria

Avant-
 Port de la
 Joliette

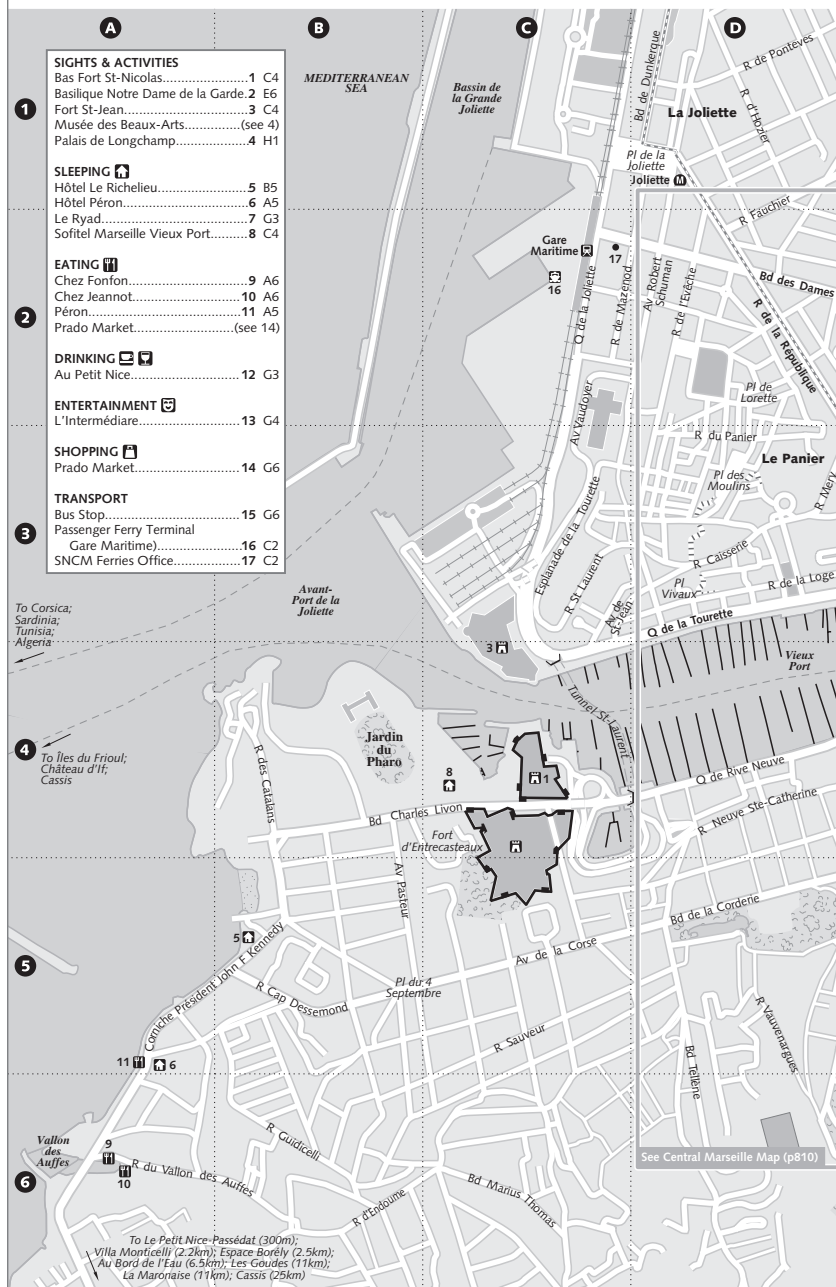
4 To Îles du Frioul;
 Château d'If;
 Cassis

11 6

9 6

10

To Le Petit Nice-Passadât (300m);
 Villa Monticelli (2.2km); Espace Borely (2.5km);
 Au Bord de l'Eau (6.5km); Les Goudes (11km);
 La Maronaise (11km); Cassis (25km)



See Central Marseille Map (p810)



Euromed project (which seeks to gentrify the entire dockland area). The city has also produced one of France's most popular football players – the now-retired Zinedine Zidane (see p53) – as well as rising star Samir Nasri (who played for Olympique de Marseille and transferred to Arsenal in 2008).

Orientation

Stretching northeastwards from the Vieux Port (Old Port) is the city's main thoroughfare, the wide bd La Canebière (from the Provençal word *canebe*, meaning 'hemp', after Marseille's ship-rigging manufacturing industry).

The Gare St-Charles train station is north of La Canebière at the northern end of bd d'Athènes. Just a few blocks south of La Canebière, near the Notre Dame du Mont-Cours Julien metro station, is cours Julien, popular with young Marseillais for its hip cafés, restaurants and a Berlin vibe. To the north of the Vieux Port is Le Panier, Marseille's oldest quarter. The city's commercial heart around rue Paradis (southeast of Vieux Port) becomes more fashionable as you head south. The new ferry terminal is west of place de la Joliette.

Greater Marseille is divided into 16 arrondissements (suburbs); addresses in this book indicate arrondissements (1er, 2e etc).

Information

BOOKSHOPS

Fnac (Map p810; ☎ 08 25 02 00 20; Centre Bourse shopping centre; M Vieux Port) On the top floor of the centre, off cours Belsunce (1er).

Librairie de la Bourse (Map p810; ☎ 04 91 33 63 06; 8 rue Paradis, 1er; M Vieux Port) The best range of maps, travel books and Lonely Planet guides in Provence.

EMERGENCY

Préfecture de Police (Map p810; ☎ 04 91 39 80 00; place de la Préfecture, 1er; M Estrangin Préfecture; ☎ 24hr)

INTERNET ACCESS

Info Café (Map p810; ☎ 04 91 33 74 98; 1 quai de Rive Neuve, 1er; M Vieux Port; per hr adult/student €3.80/3; ☎ 9am-9pm Mon-Sat, 2.30-7.30pm Sun)

INTERNET RESOURCES

Découverte PACA (www.decouverte-paca.fr) Comprehensive information on the region (PACA stands for Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur), including eco-travel.

Visit Provence (www.visitprovence.com)

LAUNDRY

Laverie des Allées (Map p810; 15 allées Léon Gambetta, 1er; M Réformés Canebière; ☎ 8am-8pm)

Laverie Self-Service (Map p810; 5 rue Breteuil, 1er; M Vieux Port; ☎ 6.30am-8pm)

MEDICAL SERVICES

Hôpital de la Timone (☎ 04 91 38 60 00; 264 rue St-Pierre, 5e; M La Timone) East of the city centre.

MONEY

There are a number of banks and exchange bureaux on La Canebière near the Vieux Port.

Canebière Change (Map p810; 39 La Canebière, 1er; M Vieux Port; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Fri, 8.30am-noon & 2-4.30pm Sat)

POST

Main Post Office (Map p810; 1 place de l'Hôtel des Postes, 1er; M Colbert) Offers currency exchange.

TOURIST INFORMATION

Tourist Office (Map p810; ☎ 04 91 13 89 00; www.marseille-tourisme.com; 4 La Canebière, 1er; M Vieux Port; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Sat, 10am-5pm Sun)

Dangers & Annoyances

Marseille isn't a hotbed of crime, but petty crimes and muggings are commonplace. There is no need to fall into paranoia but you should avoid the Belsunce area (southwest of the train station, bounded by La Canebière, cours Belsunce and rue d'Aix, rue Bernard du Bois and bd d'Athènes).

Women will get unsolicited attention, anything from wolf-whistling to people walking up the street alongside them, trying to chat them up. It is generally harmless, so ignore the attention and press on.

Sights

MUSEUMS

Unless otherwise noted, museums listed here are open 10am to 5pm Tuesday to Sunday from October to May, and 11am to 6pm from June to September. Admission to permanent exhibitions costs €2/1 for adults/children. Temporary exhibitions usually cost €3/1.50. Entry is free for those under 12 or over 60.




Centre de la Vieille Charité

Initially built as a charity shelter for the town's poor, the stunning arched pink-stone courtyard of the **Centre de la Vieille Charité** (Old Charity Cultural Centre; Map p810; ☎ 04 91 14 58 80; 2 rue



de la Charité, 2e;  Joliette) now houses Marseille's beautiful **Musée d'Archéologie Méditerranéenne** (Museum of Mediterranean Archeology;  04 91 14 58 59) and **Musée d'Arts Africains, Océaniens & Amérindiens** (Museum of African, Oceanic & American Indian Art;  04 91 14 58 38). The latter houses a diverse and often striking collection, including masks from the Americas, Africa and the Pacific.

An all-inclusive ticket costs €5/2.50 per adult/student.

Musée d'Histoire de Marseille





A fascinating insight into Marseille's cultural heritage, the **Musée d'Histoire de Marseille** (Map p810;  04 91 90 42 22; ground fl, Centre Bourse shopping centre, 1er;  Vieux Port;  noon-7pm Mon-Sat) has some extraordinary exhibits, such as the remains of a merchant vessel discovered in the Vieux Port in 1974. The vessel plied the surrounding waters back in the early 3rd century AD. To preserve the soaked and decaying wood, it was freeze-dried right where it now sits behind glass. However, most of the explanatory notes are in French only.

Musée de la Mode

Contemplate contemporary fashion trends at the **Musée de la Mode** (Fashion Museum; Map p810;  04 96 17 06 00; 11 La Canebière, 1er;  Vieux Port; adult/child €3/1.50). This stylish space has

over 2000 garments and accessories in its permanent collection. Unfortunately, it regularly closes for two or three months at a time to switch exhibitions.

Musée du Santon

One of Provence's most enduring – and endearing – Christmas traditions are *santons* (from *santonin* in Provençal, meaning 'little saint'). These plaster-moulded, kiln-fired nativity figures between 2.5cm and 15cm high were first created by Marseillais artisan Jean-Louis Lagnel (1764–1822). A private collection of 18th- and 19th-century *santons* is displayed at the **Musée du Santon** (Map p810;  04 91 54 26 58; 49 rue Neuve Ste-Catherine, 7e;  Vieux Port; admission free;  10am-12.30pm & 2-6.30pm Tue-Sat). Entrance to the adjoining **ateliers** (workshops;  8am-1pm & 2-5pm Mon-Thu), where you can watch the figures being crafted, is also free.

Palais de Longchamp

The colonnaded **Palais de Longchamp** (Longchamp Palace; Map pp806-7; bd Philippon, 4e;  Longchamp,  Cinq Avenues Longchamp), constructed in the 1860s, was designed in part to disguise a *château d'eau* (water tower) at the terminus of an aqueduct from the River Durance. Its northern wing houses Marseille's oldest museum, the **Musée des Beaux-Arts** ( 04 91 14 59 30), under-

MARSEILLE IN...

Two Days

Breakfast or brunch at **Pain & Cie** (p816) before catching a boat to the **Château d'If** (p811). Revel in Monte-Cristo intrigues as you visit its cells and discover Marseille from out at sea. Back on the **Vieux Port** (p812), stroll along the quays and head up to the city's historical **Le Panier** (see boxed text, p818) area. Dine on **Chez Madie Les Galinettes'** (p815) *bouillabaisse* (fish chowder) or signature fish, and finish the evening with a mellow drink and a spot of jazz at **La Caravelle** (p817).

On the second day, get on yer bikes for a **cycling tour** (p813) to **Espace Borély**; energetic types can head all the way to Les Goudes while beach bums can chill on the beach. Catch **Le Grand Tour** (p813) to continue your visit and stop at **Basilique Notre Dame de la Garde** (p811) for sweeping views of the bay. Head to **Au Petit Nice** (p817) in artsy Cours Julien for a cheap *apéritif* and make a beeline for **Le Femina** (p815) and its barley semolina for a gigantic couscous. To finish off in style, try one of the city's clubs (p817).

Four Days

Follow the two-day itinerary. On the third day, head out to the magnificent turquoise waters of the Calanques, by boat in the summer, or by hiking in winter (p813). On the fourth day, check out the great **Musée d'Histoire de Marseille** (above) or the funky **Musée de la Mode** (above). Mooch around the many **markets** (p816) for picnic supplies and climb up to the sculpted stone benches at the **Jardin du Pharo** (p812). Hop on a bus to the beautiful **Vallon des Auffes** (p813) and finish your trip in style with a rooftop pizza at **Chez Jeannot** (p815).

CENTRAL MARSEILLE

0 200 m
0 0.1 miles



INFORMATION	SLEEPING 🏠	L'OM Café.....44 C3
Canebière Change.....1 C3	Etap Hotel.....20 B4	Pain & Cie.....45 B4
Fnac.....(see 51)	Hôtel Belle-Vue.....21 B3	ENTERTAINMENT 🎪
Info Café.....2 B4	Hôtel du Palais.....22 C5	Kiut Bar.....46 C3
Laverie des Allées.....3 D2	Hôtel Hermès.....23 B3	La Caravelle.....(see 21)
Laverie Self-Service.....4 C4	Hôtel Relax.....24 C4	Le Trolleybus.....47 B4
Librairie de la Bourse.....5 C4	Hôtel Résidence du Vieux Port.....25 B3	OM's Boutique Officielle.....48 C3
Main Post Office.....6 B2	Hôtel Saint-Ferréol.....26 C4	Pelle Mêle.....49 B4
Préfecture de Police.....7 D5	Hôtel St-Louis.....27 C3	SHOPPING 🛍️
Tourist Office.....8 C3	New Hôtel Vieux Port.....28 C3	72% Pétanque.....50 A2
SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES	Vertigo.....29 C1	Centre Bourse Shopping Centre.....51 C3
Abbaye St Victor.....9 A5	EATING 🍴	Ceramic Ateliers.....(see 50)
Bus to Basilica.....10 B3	Chez Madie Les Galinettes.....30 A3	Fish Market.....52 B3
Centre de la Vieille Charité.....11 A2	Four des Navettes.....31 A5	La Chocolatière du Panier.....53 A2
Croisières Marseille Calanques	Fruit & Vegetable Market.....32 C5	La Cie de Provence.....54 A3
Departure Point.....12 B3	La Part des Anges.....33 C4	La Comptoir du Panier.....55 A3
Croisières Marseille Calanques	Le Clan des Cigales.....34 A2	La Maison du Pastis.....56 A3
Office.....13 A3	Le Femina.....35 D3	TRANSPORT
Frioul If Express.....14 B4	Le Mas.....36 C4	Algérie Ferries.....57 A1
La Bastide des Bains.....15 C4	Le Méditerranée.....37 C4	Avis.....58 D1
Le Grand Tour Departure Point.....16 B3	Le Souk.....38 A3	Bus Station.....59 D1
Little Trains' Departure Point.....17 B3	Les Arcenaulx.....39 B4	Espace Infos RTM.....60 C3
Musée d'Archéologie Méditerranéenne.....(see 11)	Marché des Capucins.....40 D3	Eurolines.....61 D2
Musée d'Arts Africains, Océaniens & Amérindiens.....(see 11)	Miramar.....41 B3	Europcar.....(see 58)
Musée de la Mode.....18 C3	O'Stop.....42 C4	SNCF Boutique.....(see 51)
Musée d'Histoire de Marseille..(see 51)	DRINKING 🍷 🍺	
Musée du Santon.....19 A4	Le Bar de la Marine.....43 B4	

going extensive renovations at press time and slated to reopen in 2012. The shaded park is one of the few green spaces in the centre.

BASILIQUE NOTRE DAME DE LA GARDE

Be blown away by the celestial bay and city views and knockout 19th-century architecture at the hilltop **Basilique Notre Dame de la Garde** (Map pp806-7; ☎ 04 91 13 40 80; montée de la Bonne Mère; admission free; 🚶 basilica & crypt 7am-7pm, longer hr in summer), the opulent Romano-Byzantine basilica that dominates Marseille's skyline.

Found 1km south of the Vieux Port, the domed basilica was built between 1853 and 1864 and is ornamented with coloured marble, intricate gold-laid mosaics that were superbly restored in 2006, and murals. Its bell tower is crowned by a 9.7m-tall gilded statue of the Virgin Mary on a 12m-high pedestal. Bullet marks and vivid shrapnel scars on the cathedral's northern facade mark the fierce fighting that took place here during Marseille's Battle of Liberation (15-25 August 1944).

Bus 60 links the Vieux Port with the basilica. Otherwise, there's a **little train** (Map p810; per person €5; 🚶 contact the tourist office for seasonal schedules), which departs from the port for the 20-minute trip up the steep hill. It gives you 20 minutes to look around before taking the trip back

down. By foot, count on it taking about 30 minutes each way from the Vieux Port.

CHÂTEAU D'IF

Immortalised in Alexandre Dumas' classic 1840s novel *Le Comte de Monte Cristo* (The Count of Monte Cristo), the 16th-century fortress-turned-prison **Château d'If** (off Map pp806-7; ☎ 04 91 59 02 30; adult/student €5/3.50; 🚶 9.30am-6.30pm May-Aug, 9.30am-5.30pm Tue-Sun Sep-Mar, 9.30am-5.30pm daily Apr) sits on a 3-hectare island 3.5km west of the Vieux Port. Political prisoners of all persuasions were incarcerated here, along with hundreds of Protestants (many of whom perished in the dungeons), the Revolutionary hero Mirabeau (who didn't have such a bad time once he'd seduced the cook) and the Communards of 1871.

Boats run by **Frioul If Express** (Map p810; ☎ 04 91 46 54 65; www.frioul-if-express.com; 1 quai des Belges, 1er) leave for the Château d'If from the Vieux Port at the corner of quai de la Fraternité and quai de Rive Neuve. There are more than 15 boats a day in summer, with fewer in winter (€10 return, 20 minutes).

ÎLES DU FRIOUL

A few hundred metres west of the Château d'If are the islands of **Ratonneau** and **Pomègues**. The tiny islands (each about 2.5km long, and

totalling 200 hectares) were linked by a dyke in the 1820s. From the 17th to 19th centuries they were used as a place of quarantine for people suspected of carrying the plague or cholera. Marseille's population was ravaged by the plague in 1720 when a merchant vessel carrying the disease broke the quarantine so as not to lose its shipment. The epidemics killed around 50,000 of the city's 90,000 inhabitants.

Sea birds and rare plants thrive on the islands today. The island of Ratonneau is still sprinkled with the ruins of the old yellow-fever quarantine hospital, Hôpital Caroline, and Fort Ratonneau (used by German troops during WWII). There is also a 700-boat marina on Pomègues.

Boats to the Château d'If also serve the Îles du Frioul (€10 return; €15 for a combined ticket; 35 minutes).

VIEUX PORT AREA

Ships have docked for more than 26 centuries at Marseille's colourful Vieux Port. Although the main commercial docks were transferred to the Joliette area on the coast north of here in the 1840s, it still overflows with fishing craft, yachts and local ferries.

Guarding the harbour are **Bas Fort St-Nicolas** (Map pp806-7) on the southern side and, across the water, **Fort St-Jean** (Map pp806-7), founded in the 13th century by the Knights Hospitaller of St John of Jerusalem.

In 1943 the neighbourhood on the northern side of the quai du Port, historic Le Panier quarter (Map p810; see p818), was dynamited, and much of it was rebuilt afterwards. Today its winding, narrow streets are a jumble of artisan's shops, and washing lines strung outside terraced houses.

MAX OUT MARSEILLE

To max out your time in Marseille, the **Marseille City Pass** (1-/2-day pass €20/27) gives you access to the city's museums; guided tours of the town; and unlimited travel on all public transport (as well as the little train). It also includes the boat trip and entrance to the Château d'If, and offers various discounts, such as for the Le Grand Tour tourist bus. For adults, the pass quickly pays for itself – however, it's not necessary for children under 12, as many attractions are greatly reduced or free.

Standing guard between the old and the 'new' port, is the striking Byzantine-style **Cathédrale de la Major**. Its 'stripy' facade is made of Cassis stone (local white stone) and green marble from Florence. Amazingly, this unique monument has stood in a bit of a wasteland for many years but it is set to become one of the centrepieces of the dockland redevelopment, so watch this space, literally!

On the Vieux Port's southern side, late-night restaurants and cafés pack the **place Thiers** and **cours Honoré d'Estienne d'Orves** pedestrian zone.

Northeast of La Canebière and cours Belsunce, the run-down **Belsunce** (Map p810) area is slowly being rehabilitated.

For chic, street-smart shopping, stroll west to the fashionable **6th arrondissement**, especially pedestrianised **Rue St-Ferréol**. The newly rehabilitated **rue de la République** is also fast becoming an alternative shop-till-you-drop main street.

Heading west of the Vieux Port brings you to the **Abbaye St-Victor** (Map p810), birthplace of Christianity in Marseille, built on a 3rd century BC necropolis. Perched at the edge of the peninsula is the **Jardin du Pharo** (Map pp806-7), a perfect picnic spot.

LE CORBUSIER'S UNITÉ D'HABITATION

Visionary architect Le Corbusier redefined urban living in 1952 with the completion of his vertical, 337-apartment 'garden city', **Unité d'Habitation** (off Map pp806-7; ☎ 04 91 16 78 00; www.hotelcorbusier.com; 280 bd Michelet, 8e; 📍 Le Corbusier; 🕒 by appointment), also known as Cité Radieuse (Radiant City). Along its darkened hallways, primary-coloured downlights create eerie tunnels leading to a minisupermarket, architectural bookshop and panoramic rooftop 'desert garden'.

Even if you're not staying at its hotel (p814), you can arrange to visit this tour de force or dine at its restaurant, **Le Ventre de l'Architecte** (☎ 04 91 16 78 00; mains €8 to €12; 🕒; 🍽 lunch Mon-Fri, dinner Mon-Sat) – a gourmet bistro specialising in pâté de foie gras (duck or goose liver pâté), with shimmering views of the Mediterranean. Or you could look out for the proliferation of high-rises that Le Corbusier inspired. Catch bus 83 or 21 to Le Corbusier stop.

Activities

From the Vieux Port, the **little train** (p811) tootles around Le Panier's hilly streets, but to

THE CALANQUES, SOON A NATIONAL PARK?

Just a few miles east of Marseille lies the **Calanques**, a small piece of perfectly unspoilt Mediterranean landscape: turquoise, translucent water lapping the sheer cliffs of the indented coast, interrupted every now and then by a small idyllic beach.

The area is cherished by Marseillais who love to come here to soak up some rays or go for a long Sunday walk. The site has always been protected but a project is now underway to turn the Calanques into a national park by 2010.

Whether or not the project goes ahead, you will still be able to go hiking along the many maquis-lined trails from October to June, and when the fire risks are too high over the summer months, you can take a boat trip. From Marseille, heading to the nearby village of Cassis makes for a great day trip – after a glorious morning travelling along the Calanques' coves, lunch and a bottle of crisp Cassis white at one of the port-side restaurants is just the ticket. If you're interested in wines of the area, **Cassis' tourist office** (☎ 04 42 01 71 17; quai des Moulins; ☎ 9am-12.30pm & 2-6pm Tue-Sat) supplies a free list and map of all the cellars you can visit for tastings.

see more of the city under your own steam – and for a wicked **cycling tour** – hop on one of Marseille's **le vélo** (see p819). Pedal up towards the Pharo area and then south along the corniche to take in the seascape. Stop at the cute **Valon des Auffes** before pressing on towards the beaches and leisure areas of **Espace Borély**, where cycle lanes start. The trip is about 6km. For those feeling more energetic, it's a 10km return trip from Borély to the charming hamlet of **Les Goudes**, where it used to be all the rage to own a fishing cabin.

For a DIY walking tour, the free city map handed out by the tourist office outlines three **walking circuits**.

If you're in need of a little TLC after stomping around Marseille, **La Bastide des Bains** (☎ 04 91 33 39 13; www.bastide-des-bains.com, in French; 19 rue Sainte; ☎ 10am-8pm Mon-Sat, to 6pm Sun) runs a beautiful hammam with mixed and women-only opening hours. Entrance is €30; treatments are available.

Tours

Le Grand Tour (☎ 04 91 91 05 82; adult/student/child €16/13/8; ☎ 10am-4pm) is handy for getting around as well as for seeing the city. This hop-on, hop-off, open-topped double-decker bus travels between the main sights and museums, taking in the Vieux Port, the corniche and Basilique Notre Dame de la Garde, accompanied by a five-language audio guide. Buy tickets from the tourist office or on the bus. The best place to join the tour is at the Vieux Port.

The tourist office offers various guided tours, including an English-language **walking tour** (per person €6.50; ☎ 10am Sat Jul & Aug, 2pm every other Sat Sep-Jun) of Le Panier quarter.

Croisières Marseille Calanques (☎ 08 25 13 68 00; www.croisieres-marseille-calanques.com, in French; 74 quai du Port, 2e) runs boat trips (with French commentary only) from the Vieux Port to Cassis and back (€25). Trips pass by the coves and clear turquoise waters of the **Calanques** (see boxed text, above).

Sleeping

Marseille's hotel scene has come a long way in the last two or three years. There are now genuinely charming or funky addresses, although the hostel scene is still underdeveloped for a city of this size.

BUDGET

Auberge de Jeunesse de Bonneveine (off Map pp806-7; ☎ 04 91 17 63 30; www.fuaj.org; impasse du Docteur Bonfils, 8e; dm €17.10, d incl sheets & breakfast €40.60; ☎ Feb-Dec; ☎ ☎) The building looks like a primary school, the rooms are spartan and it is a fair way out of town, *but* it is close to the beach, and it organises loads of subsidised (ie cheap) activities such as kayaking, hiking and kite-surfing. It also has a bar with a pool table, a terrace and a small restaurant. Bus 44 (stop Bonnefon) is just 200m away.

our pick Vertigo (Map p810; ☎ 04 91 91 07 11; www.hotelvertigo.fr; 42 rue des Petites Maries, 1er; ☎ Gare St-Charles SNCV; dm €23.90, d €55-65; ☎) This new boutique hostel has kissed goodbye to dodgy bunk beds, itchy blankets and hospital-like decor. Here it's 'hello' to vintage posters, a designer chrome kitchen, groovy communal spaces and trendy multilingual staff. Obviously, there's no curfew. The double rooms are particularly funky, either in the two *cabanons* (traditional fishing cabins) at the back of the courtyard

or in the main building, some with their own private terrace or balcony.

Hôtel Le Richelieu (Map pp806-7; ☎ 04 91 31 01 92; www.lerichelieu-marseille.com; 52 corniche Président John F Kennedy, 7e; d €46-110) This beach-house-type hotel has gone a little over-the-top on the old bright-coloured walls during its recent refurbishment, but the balconies, sea views, idyllic breakfast terrace and adjacent beach (June to September only) are still there, so no complaints.

Etap Hotel (Map p810; ☎ 08 92 68 05 82; fax 04 91 54 95 67; 46 rue Sainte, 1er; Mieux Port; s/d/tr €49/58/67; ☎ ☒) Try for one of the large, wood-beamed rooms in the old building (a former sea captain's house), which add a smidgen of charm to this otherwise somewhat soulless chain establishment. English-speaking staff are super helpful, and there's a good buffet breakfast for only €5. There are also 13 prized covered parking spaces (€8).

Hôtel Relax (Map p810; ☎ 04 91 33 15 87; http://relax.hotel.free.fr, in French; 4 rue Corneille, 1er; Mieux Port; s €40, d €55-60; ☎) In a dress-circle location overlooking Marseille's art deco Opera House, this 20-room hotel is run by a lovely family. Noise insulation between rooms is not great – you're likely to wake up at the same time as your neighbours. Rooms are, however, comfortable and clean, and a bargain for the location.

MIDRANGE

Hôtel Hermès (Map p810; ☎ 04 96 11 63 63; www.hotel-marseille.com; 2 rue Bonnetterie, 2e; Mieux Port; s €50, d €68-85, nuptial ste €97; ☎ ☒) The rooms are a little small and in need of a lick of paint, but they're otherwise clean and bright. There's a fabulous roof terrace on which to have breakfast or an evening drink. The elevated, rooftop nuptial suite, with its own private terrace and designer bathroom, will make you feel like you're on top of the world.

Hôtel Le Corbusier (off Map pp806-7; ☎ 04 91 16 78 00; www.hotellecorbusier.com; 280 bd Michelet, 8e; cabin with shared toilet €59, d €94-120; ☎ ☒) It's not for everyone, but staying at the 20-room hotel within this iconic concrete monolith is certainly an architectural experience, and a chance to absorb Le Corbusier's legacy. The cabins can be quite unsettling but the recently spruced-up double rooms look very sharp indeed, particularly those with sublime sea views and Le Corbusier chairs. The owner is hugely knowledgeable. Catch bus 83 or 21 to Le Corbusier stop.

Hôtel Péron (Map pp806-7; ☎ 04 91 31 01 41; www.hotel-peron.com; 119 corniche Président John F Kennedy, 7e; d €60-85; ☎) This unusual 1920s period piece houses museum-like rooms with preserved original art deco turquoise-and-black ceramic bathrooms and parquet floors inlaid with geometric motifs. Many rooms have balconies to enjoy the sea views, although you'll hear noise from the road below.




Hôtel St-Louis (Map p810; ☎ 04 91 54 02 74; www.hotel-st-louis.com; 2 rue des Récollettes, 1er; ☎) Canebière Garibaldi, Mieux Port; d €65-90; ☎ ☒) Behind the beautiful red 1800s facade, with its wrought-iron balconies and pale green shutters, lies this gorgeous boutique place with character-filled rooms – round windows, high or sloping ceilings, four-poster beds, expensive mattresses and discreet vintage furniture. You'll get the idea as soon as you walk up to the reception area with its pretty breakfast room, glass-case bookshelves and reading corner.

Hôtel Belle-Vue (Map p810; ☎ 04 96 17 05 40; www.hotel-bellevue-marseille.fr; 34 quai du Port, 2e; Mieux Port; d €68-122, tr €137; ☎) Don't be put off by the rambling facade of this seminal hotel: inside, the highly individual rooms all offer the same comfort, splendid views of the basilica and tasteful surroundings. And you only have to walk down a couple of floors to find one of Marseille's coolest bars (see La Caravelle, p817).


Le Ryad (Map pp806-7; ☎ 04 91 47 74 54; www.leryad.fr; 16 rue Sénac de Meilhan, 1er; ☎) Canebière Garibaldi, Mieux Port; s €75-120, d €95-140) With wrought-iron four-poster beds, arched alcoves, warm colours and minimalist decor, this latest addition to Marseille's hotel scene mixes Moroccan influences with modern tendencies. It is a tad over-priced so make the most of your Moroccan pancakes for breakfast.

Villa Monticelli (off Map pp806-7; ☎ 04 91 22 15 20; www.villamonticelli.com; 96 rue du Commandant Rolland, 8e; d €85-110) Colette and Jean are passionate about their city and will share with you all their secrets and best addresses. The five exquisite *chambre d'hôte* (B&B) rooms in their stunning villa are absolutely worth the slightly outer-city location. The amazing breakfast of homemade everything (jams, yoghurts, crêpes etc) will get you started in the morning, with panoramic views from the terrace to boot. It's probably the best value for money for this type of accommodation.

Hôtel Résidence du Vieux Port (Map p810; ☎ 04 91 91 91 22; www.hotelmarseille.com; 18 quai du Port, 2e;





M Vieux Port; d €93-137, apt €165;    The views from here of the old port and Notre Dame de la Garde are the best in town, and the balconies on which to enjoy them are a godsend. However, the print wallpaper in the Provençal rooms is overwhelming, to say the least, so try for one of the 'traditional' rooms instead. The two-room apartments are great for families.


Hôtel Saint-Ferréol (Map p810; ☎ 04 91 33 12 21; www.hotelsaintferreol.com; 19 rue Pisançon, 1er; **M** Vieux Port; d €95-99;   ) On the corner of the city's most beautiful lamp-lit pedestrian shopping street, you'll find this very plush hotel with its individually and richly decorated rooms (many inspired by famous artists such as Van Gogh or Cézanne). There is wi-fi throughout, and very friendly staff.

Hôtel du Palais (Map pp806-7; ☎ 04 91 37 78 86; www.hotelmarseille.com; 26 rue Breteuil, 6e; **M** Estrangin Préfecture; d €95-109;    ) Ten of the 22 rooms at this stylish hotel have heavenly king-sized beds. As for colours, you'll have a choice of raspberry pink, pale lavender blues or serene beige. There is also a business corner and wi-fi.

TOP END

New Hôtel Vieux Port (Map p810; ☎ 04 91 99 23 23; www.new-hotel.com; 3bis rue Reine Elisabeth, 1er; **M** Vieux Port; s €140-220, d €160-240;    ) Sophisticated, central and decorated with an eye for detail, the rooms in this hotel are themed according to exotic locales such as Mexico, India, Morocco, Japan and Africa. The dining room with its high ceilings and seven French windows promises a grand start to the day.

Le Petit Nice-Passédat (off Map pp806-7; ☎ 04 91 59 25 92; www.passeadat.fr; Anse de Maldormé, 7e; d low/high season from €230/370;    ) Nestled into the rocks above a petite cove, this is an idyllic hide-away of just 16 individually and exquisitely appointed rooms overlooking the mosaic-tiled saltwater pool and cacti garden. It's also home to Gerald Passédat's virtuoso restaurant (mains €51 to €95, open for lunch and dinner Tuesday to Saturday), which reached gastronomic consecration in 2008 by receiving its third Michelin star.

Sofitel Marseille Vieux Port (Map pp806-7; ☎ 04 91 15 59 55; www.softel-marseille-vieuxport.com; 36 bd Charles Livon, 7e; d from €195;     ) Gaze at the beautiful old port while having a bath in the oversized square tub of the most recently renovated rooms; fall asleep the minute your head hits your 100% feather bed; and enjoy



the enchanting views of the city and the port anywhere from the lobby, bar or restaurant. Excellent wheelchair access.

Eating


Marseille's signature dish *bouillabaisse* is a fish soup made from five different fish, along with tomatoes, white wine, fennel and saffron, and served with *rouille* (garlic mayonnaise) and croutons. It is therefore an expensive dish. Any less than €35 and it won't be the genuine article.


RESTAURANTS

The Vieux Port overflows with restaurants. For fare as diverse as Marseille itself, cours Julien and its surrounding streets are jammed with French, Indian, Antillean, Pakistani, Thai, Armenian, Lebanese, Tunisian and Italian restaurants.

Le Femina (Map p810; ☎ 04 91 54 03 56; 1 rue de Musée, 1er;  Canebière Garibaldi, **M** Noailles; menus €15;  closed Sun & Mon) Heading east from the Vieux Port towards cours Julien, Le Femina is a great – and affordable – traditional Algerian place for succulent couscous (you should definitely try the barley semolina).

ourpick **Chez Madie Les Galinettes** (Map p810; ☎ 04 91 90 40 87; 138 quai du Port, 2e; mains €25-50, menus €15/22/27;  lunch & dinner Mon-Sat, closed Sat lunch in summer) They're so friendly at Madie's that you'll leave feeling as though you've just had dinner with friends. The port-side terrace is perfect for those long summer evenings, and if the weather is not on your side, the great modern art collection on the walls inside will bring consolation. There's lots of fish on the menu, including the house speciality *Les Galinettes*, as well as a great *bouillabaisse* that you'll need to order in advance.

La Part des Anges (Map p810; ☎ 04 91 33 55 70; 33 rue Sainte; mains €15,  lunch & dinner Mon-Sat, dinner Sun) The name *la part des anges* (angels' share) refers to the amount of alcohol that evaporates through a barrel during wine (or whisky) fermentation. But at this gem of a wine bistro in Marseille's centre, you'd be best not to lose an ounce or a drop of whatever you eat or drink: the French fare is cooked to perfection and the wine list is an oenologist's dream.

Chez Jeannot (Map pp806-7; ☎ 04 91 52 11 28; 129 rue du Vallon des Auffes; mains €15-22;  lunch & dinner Tue-Sat, lunch Sun, closed Mon) An institution among Marseillais, the rooftop terrace overlooking the stunning Vallon des Auffes is booked out

days in advance. The atmosphere is jovial and uncomplicated, just like the thin-crust pizzas, *grillades* (grilled meats) and seafood that land on your plate. One of the most authentic addresses in town.

Le Souk (Map p810; ☎ 04 91 91 29 29; 100 quai du Port, 2e; M) Vieux Port; menus €20-30; ☺ lunch & dinner Tue-Sat, lunch Sun) Thanks to Marseille's heritage, you'll eat some of the best North African food this side of the Med. Le Souk is one such place, with great *tajines* (slow-cooked meat and vegetable stews) and wonderful almond and pistachio pastries saturated in honey.

Au Bord de l'Eau (off Map pp806-7; ☎ 04 91 72 68 04; 15 rue des Arapèdes, port de la Madrague Montredon, 8e; menus €25-30; ☺ lunch & dinner Mon & Thu-Sun, lunch Tue Sep-mid-Jun, lunch & dinner Thu-Sun, dinner Mon-Wed mid-Jun-Aug) 'At the water's edge' is the kind of place Marseillais cherish: easy on the frills, heavy on outdoor space, steady on the price and artistic on the plate. The *menus* (fixed-price menus) have the usual pizza, pasta and fresh fish. Catch bus 83 along the coast to av du Prado (by the statue of David), then take bus 19 further south along the coast.

Miramar (Map p810; ☎ 04 91 90 10 40; 12 quai du Port, 2e; M) Vieux Port; mains €25-50; ☺ lunch & dinner Tue-Sat) Dine on expensive seafood or *bouillabaisse*, beneath glowing burgundy wall-mounted lamps in the dining rooms, or on a burgundy velvet settee at the white-clothed tables on the *quai*-side (quay-side) terrace. The chef runs cooking classes (€120) where he reveals his seafood secrets; see the tourist office for information and bookings.

Le Mas (Map p810; ☎ 04 91 33 25 90; 4 rue Lulli; M) Estrangin Préfecture; menu €25; ☺ lunch & dinner, open till 6am, closed Sun Oct-Apr) The walls of Le Mas are lined with photographs of stars, showbiz types, celebs and other insomniac artists who dine at this little late-night place that has become a Marseille institution. The food is rich, perfect for famished night-owls.

Les Arcenaux (Map p810; ☎ 04 91 59 80 30; 27 cours Honoré d'Estienne d'Orves, 1er; M) Vieux Port; menus €30-50; ☺ lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) Born out of the tumultuous arsenal's history, this cavernous complex contains an antiquarian and contemporary bookshop with a specialist interest in gastronomy, as well as a bookshelves-lined restaurant and *salon de thé* (tearoom) serving ice creams named after literary classics.

Chez Fonfon (Map pp806-7; ☎ 04 91 52 14 38; 140 rue du Vallon des Auffes, 7e; mains around €40; ☺ lunch & dinner Tue-Sat, dinner Mon) Overlooking the enchanting

little harbour Vallon des Auffes, Chez Fonfon is famed for its *bouillabaisse*. The place is quite formal, although the wonderful views brighten things up, as does the lush list of local rosés and crisp Cassis white wines. Book ahead.

Péron (Map pp806-7; ☎ 04 91 52 15 22; 56 corniche Président John F Kennedy, 7e; menus €56-68; ☺ lunch & dinner Tue-Sat, lunch Sun) If you're going to throw budgetary caution to the wind, do it at this designer, sun-decked place perched on the edge of the corniche, opposite the Château d'If. The food (marinated tuna, scallops with lemon polenta) is phenomenal, and the views of the Med, particularly at sunset, are mesmerising.

CAFÉS

Cafés crowd quai de Rive Neuve and cours Honoré Estienne d'Orves (6e), a large, long, open square two blocks south of the quay. Another cluster overlooks place de la Préfecture, at the southern end of rue St-Ferréol (1er).

Le Méditerranée (Map p810; ☎ 04 91 55 58 32; 51 quai des Belges, 2e; M) Vieux Port; juice €4, snacks €3-6.50; ☺ 9am-7pm winter, 9am-9pm summer) Get a vitamin fix with a freshly squeezed fruit juice or bite into tasty crêpes or panini as you wait for your boat to the Château d'If.

O'Stop (Map p810; ☎ 04 91 33 85 34; 15 rue St-Saëns, 1er; M) Vieux Port; menu €10; ☺ 24hr) Ideal for late-night munchies, O'Stop is the only place in town to serve hot and cold sustenance around the clock.

Pain & Cie (Map p810; ☎ 04 91 33 55 00; 18 place aux Huiles, 1er; M) Vieux Port; brunch €19; ☺ Tue-Sat 8am-10.30pm, 8am-6pm Sun & Mon) Trendy locals brunch here at the weekend or come for a quick *tartine* (posh French for 'sandwich') at lunchtime, or cake and coffee in the afternoon.

SELF-CATERING

Stock up on fruit and vegetables at **Marché des Capucins** (Map p810; place des Capucins, 1er; ☒) Canebière Garibaldi, M) Noailles; ☺ 8am-7pm Mon-Sat), one block south of La Canebière; and at the **fruit and vegetable market** (Map pp806-7; cours Pierre Puget, 6e; M) Estrangin Préfecture; ☺ 8am-1pm Mon-Fri).

See opposite for more market listings.

For picnic treats, the **Four des Velltes** (Map pp806-7; ☎ 04 91 33 32 12; 136 rue Sainte) sells the iconic boat-shaped, orange-flower Navette biscuits by the half-dozen as well as other southern delicacies and bread.

There are a couple of supermarkets in the monstrous concrete bunker that is the Centre Bourse shopping centre (Map p810).

Drinking

Options for a coffee or something stronger abound on and around the Vieux Port. Students and artists congregate at the alternative cafés and bars of cours Julien and its surrounding streets.

Au Petit Nice (Map pp806-7; ☎ 04 91 48 43 04; 28 place Jean Jaurès, 6e; M Notre Dame du Mont-Cours Julien; ☎ 6.30am-2am) A living illustration of what cheap and cheerful means: €2 a drink, whatever it is – how could you not be happy?

Le Bar de la Marine (Map p810; ☎ 04 91 54 95 42; 15 quai de Rive Neuve, 7e; M Vieux Port; ☎ 7am-1am) Marcel Pagnol filmed the card party scenes in *Marius* at this Marseille institution, which draws folks from every walk of life.

L'OM Café (Map p810; ☎ 04 91 33 80 33; 3 quai des Belges, 1er; M Vieux Port; menus €15-25; ☎ 7am-1am) If you haven't managed to bag tickets to watch the city's football team play, this is the place to come and watch the game (unless you want to support the rival team, in which case you should leave Marseille).

Entertainment

Cultural events are covered in *L'Hebdo* (in French; €1.20), available around town. The website www.marseillebynight.com (in French) also has listings.

Tickets for most events are sold at *billetteries* (ticket counters) including Fnac (p808) as well as the tourist office.

To get a feel for Marseille's heart and soul, go and watch the city's cherished football team, Olympique de Marseille (OM), play at its home ground **Stade Vélodrome** (off Map pp806-7; 3 bd Michelet, 8e; M rond point du Prado). It's almost more about supporters and atmosphere than about players and game. Tickets are sold in town at **OM's Boutique Officielle** (Map p810; ☎ 04 91 33 52 28; 44 La Canebière, 1er; ☎ Canebière Garibaldi, M Noailles; ☎ 10am-7pm Mon-Sat) and cost as little as €20.

LIVE MUSIC

La Caravelle (Map p810; ☎ 0496 17 05 40; 34 quai du Port, 2e; M Vieux Port; ☎ 7am-2am) Live jazz and chilled vibes are what's waiting for you at Hôtel Belle-Vue's (p814) 1st-floor bar. On balmy nights, a mojito on the small balcony overlooking the port is just the ticket, and in winter, the timber-lined walls, wooden tables and red vinyl upholstered chairs are wonderfully atmospheric.

Pelle Mêle (Map p810; ☎ 04 91 54 85 26; 8 place aux Huiles, 1er; M Vieux Port; ☎ 5pm-1am) Jive to more

good jazz at this lively bistro near the port. Bands start at around 10pm.

L'Intermédiaire (Map pp806-7; ☎ 04 91 47 01 25; 63 place Jean Jaurès, 6e; M Notre Dame du Mont-Cours Julien; ☎ 7pm-2am Mon-Sat) This grungy venue with its graffitied walls is one of the best venues in town for live music, bands or DJs; and if you're game, the stage is yours every Tuesday night.

NIGHTCLUBS

La Maronaise (off Map pp806-7; ☎ 04 91 72 79 39; rte de la Maronaise, 8e; admission €20; ☎ 9am-5am Wed-Sat early May-early Sep) At this uberhip hang-out at Les Goudes on Cap Croisette, slide into a sun lounge and enjoy the private little sand beach before dancing under the stars till dawn. Take bus 19.

Other happenin' haunts:

Le Bazar (off Map pp806-7; ☎ 06 23 40 42 59; 90 bd Rabata, 8e; admission €10-20, ladies free Fri; ☎ mid-night-6am Thu-Sun) Vast Moroccan-style space with bungalows and palms.

Le Millenium (off Map pp806-7; ☎ 06 15 62 54 97; rte de Cassis, 9e; admission €20; ☎ 11pm-6am Thu-Sat) Particularly popular with students living on the nearby campus, this is the place to listen to techno house beats. About 6km from the city.

Le Trolleybus (Map p810; ☎ 04 91 54 30 45; 24 quai de Rive Neuve, 7e; M Vieux Port; ☎ 11pm-dawn Wed-Sat) Shake your booty to techno, funk, indie and more inside this tunnel-like harbourside club.

GAY & LESBIAN VENUES

The website www.gaymapmarseille.com has good coverage of Marseille's and Aix-en-Provence's gay scene, with everything from bars to bookshops. **Kiut Bar** (Map p810; ☎ 04 91 33 04 26; 10 rue Beauvau, 1e; M Vieux Port; ☎ 6pm-late) is the most happening gay venue in town. It even has a see-through shower (yes) where you can err, wash (open *douche* on Tuesdays).

Shopping

You'll find artisan specialities in the streets spiralling out from the Vieux Port, especially in **Le Panier** (see boxed text, p818).

MARKETS

The small but enthralling **fish market** (Map p810; quai des Belges; M Vieux Port; ☎ 8am-1pm) is a daily fixture at the Vieux Port docks. Cours Julien hosts a Wednesday-morning organic fruit and vegetable market and an Aladdin's cave bric-a-brac market every second Sunday of

MARSEILLE'S BASKET

North of the Vieux Port, Marseille's old city, Le Panier quarter (2e) translates as 'the basket', and was the site of the Greek *agora* (marketplace). In its history-woven streets you can get your fill of its past, as well as fill your shopping basket with products handmade by artisans in Marseille.

Sniff scented soaps at **La Cie de Provence** (Map p810; ☎ 04 91 56 20 94; 1 rue Caisserie), and pick up bathroom accoutrements like colourful towels at the neighbouring **La Comptoir du Panier** (Map p810; ☎ 04 91 91 29 65; 5 rue de la Prison). Olive soaps, olive oils and brilliantly named preserves (Gratte-Cul meaning 'Scratchy Ass' being just one of them; for the record, it's dog-rose jam) fill **72% Pétanque** (Map p810; ☎ 04 91 91 14 57; 10 rue du Petit Puits). Nearby are a clutch of ceramic ateliers with shops attached to their workshops, which you can just pop into. For sustenance, **Le Clan des Cigales** (Map p810; ☎ 06 63 78 07 83; 8 rue du Petit Puits) serves homemade aiöli (a traditional Provençal garlic mayonnaise served with cod, winkles, poached vegetables and hard-boiled eggs) on Fridays, savoury tarts and good vegetarian options.

For food shopping, try **La Chocolatière du Panier** (Map p810; ☎ 04 91 91 67 66; 49 rue du Petit Puits), with original flavours of handmade chocolates such as fig and *calisson* (marzipan). For drinks, head to **La Maison du Pastis** (Map p810; ☎ 04 91 90 86 77; 108 quai du Port), where you can sample more than 90 varieties of pastis (an aniseed-flavoured *apéritif*) or splash out on absinthe.

the month (running from 8am to 7pm; metro Notre Dame du Mont-Cours Julien).

Marseille's biggest market, the daily **Prado Market** (Map pp806-7; M Castellane or Périer; ☞ 8am-1pm) stretches from the Castellane metro station along av du Prado to the Périer metro station, with a staggering array of clothes, fruit, vegetables and speciality items – and a flower market on Friday morning.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Aéroport Marseille-Provence (☎ 04 42 14 14 14; www.marseille.aeroport.fr), also known as Aéroport Marseille-Marignane, is 25km northwest of town in Marignane. It has numerous flights to Europe and North Africa, including flights with low-cost airlines.

BOAT

Marseille's **passenger ferry terminal** (Map pp806-7; ☎ 04 91 39 40 00; www.marseille-port.fr; M Joliette) is 250m south of place de la Joliette (1er).

The **Société Nationale Maritime Corse-Méditerranée** (SNCM; Map pp806-7; ☎ 08 25 88 80 88; www.sncm.fr; 61 bd des Dames, 2e; M Joliette; ☞ 8am-6pm Mon-Fri, 8.30am-noon & 2-5.30pm Sat) links Marseille with Corsica (see p907), Sardinia and Tunisia. It also serves Algeria, although services are prone to disruption/cancellation because of the political troubles there.

See the Transport chapter for more information on ferry services to/from North Africa (p967) and Sardinia (p967).

There is an office for **Algérie Ferries** (Map p810; ☎ 04 91 90 89 28; 58 bd des Dames, 2e; M Colbert; ☞ 9am-noon & 1-5pm Mon-Fri).

BUS

The **bus station** (Map p810; ☎ 08 91 02 40 25; 3 rue Honorat, 3e; M Gare St-Charles SNCF) is at the back of the train station. Tickets can be purchased from the information desk inside the train station or from the driver.

Buses travel to Aix-en-Provence (€4.60, 35 minutes via the autoroute or one hour via the N8, every five to 10 minutes), Avignon (€18.50, two hours, one daily), Cannes (€25, two hours, up to three daily), Carpentras (€14, two hours, three daily), Nice (€26.50, three hours, up to three daily), Nice airport, Orange and other destinations.

Services to some destinations, including Cassis, use the stop on **place Castellane** (Map pp806-7; 6e; M Castellane), south of the centre. Bus drivers sell tickets.

Eurolines (☎ 08 92 89 90 91; www.eurolines.com; 3 allées Léon Gambetta; ☞ 10am-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-2pm Sat) has international coach services; see p964.

CAR

Rental agencies offering decent rates include **Avis** (Map p810; ☎ 08 20 61 16 36) and **Europcar** (Map p810; ☎ 08 25 82 56 80), both at the train station.

TRAIN

Marseille's passenger train station, **Gare St-Charles** (Map p810) is served by both metro

lines. There's an **information and ticket reservation office** (☎ 9am-8pm Mon-Sat, 5.15am-10pm for ticket purchases), as well as a **left-luggage office** (from €3.50; ☎ 7.30am-10pm) next to platform A.

In town, tickets can be bought at the SNCF Boutique inside the Centre Bourse shopping centre (Map p810).

From Marseille there are trains to pretty much anywhere in France and beyond. Sample destinations and starting fares include Paris' Gare de Lyon (€80.20, three hours, 21 daily), Nice (€27.80, 2½ hours, 21 daily), Avignon (€23.10, 35 minutes, 27 daily) and Lyon (€57.60, 1¾ hours, 16 daily).

Getting Around

TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

Navette (Marseille ☎ 04 91 50 59 34; airport ☎ 04 42 14 31 27) shuttle buses link Aéroport Marseille-Provence (€8, 25 minutes) with Marseille's train station. There are buses every 20 minutes between 5.30am and 10.50pm.

BICYCLE

Pick up a bike from more than 100 bike stations across the city, and drop it off at one of those same stations. The system is called **le vélo** (www.levelo-mpm.fr); it's free for the first 30 minutes, costs €1 for the next 30, and is then €1 per hour thereafter. You'll need a credit card to register, and instructions are in French. There are stations all the way along the corniche to Anse de la Pointe Rouge (8km south of the Vieux Port) and throughout the centre.

BUS, METRO & TRAM

Marseille has two metro lines (Métro 1 and Métro 2), two tram lines (yellow and green) and an extensive bus network, all run by the Régie des Transports Marseillais (RTM).

The metro runs between 5am and 10.30pm Monday to Thursday and until 12.30am Friday to Sunday; the tram runs between 5am and 1am daily, year-round. Bus services generally stop around 9.30pm, when night buses take over until 12.30am – most start their run in front of the **Espace Infos RTM** (Map p810; ☎ 04 91 91 92 10; 6 rue des Fabres, 1er; **M** Vieux Port; ☎ 8.30am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-12.30pm & 2-5.30pm Sat), where you can obtain information and tickets for public transport.

Bus, metro or tram tickets (€1.70) can be used on any combination of metros and buses for one hour after they've been time-stamped. A pass for one/three days costs €4.50/10.

TAXI

It won't look anything like Luc Besson's celebrated vehicle, but there's a taxi stand to the right as you exit the train station through the main entrance. **Taxi Radio Marseille** (☎ 04 91 02 20 20) run taxis 24 hours a day.

AIX-EN-PROVENCE

pop 141,200

Aix-en-Provence is to Provence what the Left Bank is to Paris: a pocket of Bohemian chic with an edgy student crowd. It's hard to believe Aix (pronounced ex) is just 25km from chaotic, exotic Marseille. With some 30,000 students from the Université de Provence

CHRISTMAS IN PROVENCE *Emilie Filou*

If you thought Provence was only a summertime destination, think again. It has some of the quirkiest Christmas traditions.

Get your santons These traditional plaster-moulded figurines are used to depict nativity scenes. There 55 different kinds of characters, from Mary, Joseph and baby Jesus to shepherds and animals in the stable. Find out more at the Musée du Santon in Marseille (p809).

Eat 13 desserts You must sample all 13 desserts but it doesn't matter how much you eat of each (could be just one almond and one raisin for instance), otherwise it's bad luck for the following year: *Fougasse* or *pompe à l'huile* (traditional Provençal pastries – buy them at **Four des Navettes**; see p816); *nougat blanc* (white nougat); *nougat noir* (black nougat); dried figs; almonds; walnuts; raisins; pear; apple; orange or mandarin; dates; *calisson d'Aix* (see boxed text, p825); and quince jam or paste.

Shop at the Christmas markets Your 13 desserts, presents and *santons* can be bought at the amazing Christmas fairs in Marseille, Arles and Aix-en-Provence.

Ski or go to the beach If the weather's nice, people regularly go to the beach for Christmas. Alternatively, head to Provence's mountains and ski in **Pra Loup** (p858) or down **Mont Ventoux** (p848).

Aix-Marseille, including many foreign students, Aix is packed with bars, cafés, affordable restaurants and a wicked nightlife. The city itself is rich in culture, and elegant, with its plane-tree-shaded boulevards and chic boutiques. Were it not for its merry student population, it could be considered snobbish.

Aix marks the spot where, under the consul Sextius Calvinus, Roman forces enslaved the inhabitants of the Ligurian Celtic stronghold of Entremont. In 123 BC the military camp was named *Aquae Sextiae* (Waters of Sextius) for the thermal springs, which still flow today. In the 12th century the counts of Provence proclaimed Aix their capital, which it remained until the Revolution, when it was supplanted by Marseille. The city became a centre of culture under King René (1409–80); two of Aix' most famous sons are painter Paul Cézanne and novelist Émile Zola.

Testament to this rich heritage is Aix' nomination as European Capital of Culture for 2013 along with Marseille and Arles: expect even more to happen in this all-happening city.

Orientation

Cours Mirabeau extends eastwards to place Forbin from place du Général de Gaulle, a roundabout with a huge fountain (commonly referred to as just La Rotonde). The city's mostly pedestrianised old town, Vieil Aix, is north of cours Mirabeau. Radiating from La Rotonde, av des Belges leads southwest to the bus station, while av Victor Hugo brings you southeast to the train station – the tourist office is on the southern edge of La Rotonde. The TGV station is 8km from the city centre, linked by shuttle buses.

South of cours Mirabeau is the Quartier Mazarin, with a street grid that was laid out in the 17th century. The entire city centre is ringed by a series of maddening one-way boulevards.

Information

BOOKSHOPS

Book in Bar (☎ 04 42 26 60 07; 4 rue Cabassol) The best selection of English-language books in town, with a great café offering homemade muffins.

Librairie Goulard (☎ 04 42 27 66 47; 37 cours Mirabeau) Aix' best selection of English-language Lonely Planet guides.

Paradox Librairie Internationale (☎ 04 42 26 47 99; 15 rue du 4 Septembre) A reasonable selection of fiction in English; the place also doubles up as a British

grocery shop (Heinz tomato soup, Quavers and digestive biscuits – it's all here).

INTERNET ACCESS

Netgames (☎ 04 42 26 60 41; 52 rue Aumône Vieille; per hr €3; ☎ 10am-midnight) Central and state of the art.

LAUNDRY

Laundrettes (open from 7am or 8am to 8pm) can be found at 5 rue de la Fontaine, 36 cours Sextius and 60 rue Bouleçon.

MONEY

Commercial banks mass along cours Mirabeau and cours Sextius, the latter running north-south to the west of La Rotonde.

Change Nazareth (7 rue Nazareth; ☎ 9am-7am Jul & Aug, 9am-6.30pm Mon-Sat Sep-Jun) Inside a jewellery shop.

POST

Post Office (place de l'Hôtel de Ville)

TOURIST INFORMATION

Tourist Office (☎ 04 42 16 11 61; www.aixenprovence tourism.com; 2 place du Général de Gaulle; ☎ 8.30am-7pm Mon-Sat, 10am-1pm & 2-6pm Sun) Longer hours in summer; very pro-active and helpful.

Sights & Activities

Art, culture and architecture abound in Aix. The tourist office has some great DIY walking tour maps. Otherwise, just follow your nose: Aix is a stroller's heaven.

The graceful **cours Mirabeau** is the literal and spiritual heart of Aix. Cafés spill out onto the footpaths on the sunny northern side. The southern side shelters a string of elegant Renaissance *hôtels particuliers* (private mansions). The mossy **fontaine d'Eau Thermale**, at the intersection of cours Mirabeau and rue du 4 Septembre, spouts 34°C water, a pleasant hint of what's awaiting you at the **Thermes Sextius** (thermal spa; ☎ 04 42 23 81 82; www.thermes-sextius.com; 55 av des Thermes; day pass incl 4 treatments from €84).

Quartier Mazarin, south of cours Mirabeau, is home to some of Aix' finest buildings. Further south still is the peaceful **parc Jourdan**, dominated by Aix' largest fountain and home to the town's **Boulodrome Municipal** – locals gather here to play *pétanque* (a game similar to lawn bowls, played with heavy metal balls on a sandy pitch) under the plane trees.

For more greenery (dry maquis, actually), the nearby **Montagne Ste-Victoire** offers dozens of walking and cycling tracks. The tourist

AIX-EN-PROVENCE

	A	B	C	D
INFORMATION	Book in Bar.....1 B5	Musée Granet.....14 D5	Brasserie Léopold.....(see 24)	
Change Nazareth.....2 B4	Thermes Sextius.....15 A3	Charlotte.....27 A4		
Laundrette.....3 A4	SLEEPING	icône.....28 C4		
Laundrette.....5 C3	Grand Hôtel Nègre Coste.....16 C4	La Boulangerie du Coin.....29 C3		
Librairie Goulard.....6 C4	Hôtel Cardinal.....17 C5	La Chimère Café.....30 A4		
Netgames.....7 B4	Hôtel Cardinal (Annexe).....18 D5	Le Formal.....31 B4		
Paradox Librairie Internationale.....8 C5	Hôtel Cézanne.....19 B5	Le Petit Verdot.....32 A4		
Post Office.....9 B3	Hôtel Concorde.....20 D5	Le Zinc d'Hugo.....33 B3		
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SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES	Boulodrome Municipal.....11 C6	EATING	La Belle Époque.....36 C4	
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Mini Tram.....13 B4	Boulangerie.....26 C4	L'Orienthé.....38 B3		
		L'Unic.....39 B3		

*To Atelier Paul Cézanne (800m):
La Laubatas (25km); N7-to Salon
de Provence (34km); Aries (63km)*

*To Manosque (53km);
Sisteron (100km);
Digne-les-Bains
via N96 (110km)*

*To Bibémus Quarries (5km);
Montagne Ste-Victoire
via D10 (8km)*

*To Camping
Arc-en-Ciel (2km);
Aéroport Marseilles-
Provence (25km);
Toulon (68km);
A8 to Nices
Côte d'Azur
(170km)*

ENTERTAINMENT

Ciné Mazarin.....40 B5

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SHOPPING

Cave du Félibrige.....43 B3

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Food and Flower Market.....45 B3

Food and Flower Market.....46 C3

Produce Market.....47 B3

Roy René.....48 C4

TRANSPORT

Aix en Bus Information Desk. (see 10)

Bus Station.....49 A6

PROVENCE

AIX-CELLENT

Brilliant savings come in the form of the **Aix City Pass**, which costs €15, lasts five days and includes admission to **Atelier Paul Cézanne** (Cézanne's studio; right), **Bastide du Jas de Bouffan** (Cézanne's former family home; right) and **Musée Granet** (below), as well as a trip on the minitram and one of the tourist office's guided walks. The pass can be purchased at the tourist office or either of the two Cézanne sights.

office sells the excellent *Montagne Ste-Victoire* map for €4.50, with 24 detailed itineraries.

MUSEUMS

Housed in a 17th-century Knights of Malta priory, the pride and joy of **Musée Granet** (☎ 04 42 52 88 32; place St-Jean de Malte; 🕒 11am–7pm Wed–Mon Jun–Sep, noon–6pm Wed–Mon Oct–May) is its nine Cézanne paintings (although none of his masterworks). One of the paintings features in the unique De Cézanne à Giacometti collection, featuring works by Picasso, Léger, Matisse, Tal Coat and Giacometti, among others. There are also extensive 16th- to 20th-century Italian, Flemish and French paintings.

The awesome **Fondation Victor Vasarely** (☎ 04 42 200 109; 1 av Marcel Pagnol; adult/student €7/4; 🕒 10am–1pm & 2–6pm Tue–Sat), 4km west of the city, was designed by the Optical Art leader himself. It was created to bring together art, architecture and technology. The building is a masterpiece, but the 16 hexagonal cells exposing his monumental geometric works of art are phenomenal. Take bus 4 to the Vasarely stop.

CATHÉDRALE ST-SAUVEUR

A potpourri of architectural styles, the **Cathédrale St-Sauveur** (rue Laroque; 🕒 8am–noon & 2–6pm) was built between 1285 and 1350. A Romanesque 12th-century nave is incorporated in its southern aisle; the chapels were added in the 14th and 15th centuries; and there's a 5th-century sarcophagus (stone coffin) in the apse. More-recent additions include the 18th-century gilt baroque organ. The acoustics make the Gregorian chants (usually sung at 4.30pm Sunday) an unforgettable experience.

CÉZANNE SIGHTS

His star may have reached its giddiest heights after his death, but the life of local

lad Paul Cézanne (1839–1906) is treasured in Aix. To see where he ate, drank, studied and painted, you can follow the **Circuit de Cézanne** (Cézanne Trail), marked by footpath-embedded bronze plaques inscribed with the letter C. An informative English-language guide to the plaques, *Cézanne's Footsteps*, is available free from the tourist office.

Though none of his works hang here, Cézanne's last studio, **Atelier Paul Cézanne** (☎ 04 42 21 06 53; www.atelier-cezanne.com; 9 av Paul Cézanne; adult/student €5.50/2; 🕒 10am–noon & 2–5pm Oct–Mar, to 6pm Apr–Jun & Sep, 10am–6pm Jul & Aug) is a must for any Cézanne fan. It's painstakingly preserved as it was at the time of his death, strewn with his tools and still-life models; his admirers claim this is where Cézanne is most present. The atelier is 1.5km north of the tourist office on a hilltop; take bus 20 to the Atelier Cézanne stop. Otherwise, it's a 20 minute-walk from the centre.

The other two main Cézanne sights in Aix are the **Bastide du Jas de Bouffan** (on the western fringes of the city), the former family home where Cézanne started painting as a young man, and the **Bibémus quarries**, where he did most of his *Montagne Ste-Victoire* paintings. Head to the tourist office for bookings (required) and information on how to get to these sites.

Tours

The tourist office runs a packed schedule of guided walking or bus tours in English and French, from the expected 'Sur les pas de Cézanne' (Retracing Cézanne's steps), to Vieil Aix guided walks or bus tours of the nearby Luberon and Alpilles areas. Check its website (www.aixenprovencetourism.com) for complete schedules. Walking tours cost €8; bus tours are from €28.

For a motorised and multilingual version of the city tours, the **Mini Tram** (☎ 06 11 54 27 73; www.cpts.fr, in French; €6) leaves from place du Général de Gaulle and winds its way through the Quartier Mazarin, along cours Mirabeau, and around Vieil Aix.

Festivals & Events

The tourist office keeps a full list of festivities: there are several each month.

Rencontres du 9ème Art (www.bd-aix.com, in French) Comic books, animation and cartoon art feature during this March festival.

Festival International d'Art Lyrique d'Aix-en-Provence (International Festival of Lyrical Art;

www.festival-aix.com) The highlight of Aix' sumptuous cultural calendar is this month-long festival in July, which brings classical music, opera and ballet to city venues such as the Théâtre de l'Archevêché, and outside the Cathédrale St-Sauveur (see opposite), while buskers keep cours Mirabeau's festive spirits high.

Festival de la Roche d'Anthéron (www.festival-piano.com) Held in July, this is another biggie, dedicated to piano music and taking place across venues from Aix to the Luberon.

Sleeping

The tourist office has lists of *chambres d'hôtes* and *gîtes ruraux* (self-contained holiday cottages) in and around Aix. Accommodation bookings are coordinated through the **Centrale de Réservation** (☎ 04 42 16 11 84; resaix@aixenproven.cetourism.com).

BUDGET

Auberge de Jeunesse du Jas de Bouffan (☎ 04 42 20 15 99; www.fuaj.org; 3 av Marcel Pagnol; dm incl breakfast & sheets €17.50-29.50; ☎ reception 7am-1pm & 5pm-midnight, closed mid-Dec-Jan) Shiny new with a bar, tennis courts, secure bike shed and massive barbecues in summer, this HI hostel is 2km west of the centre. It's such a shame that the motorway is just down below... Take bus 4 from La Rotonde to the Vasarely stop.

Camping Arc-en-Ciel (☎ 04 42 26 14 28; rte de Nice; camping site for 2 people plus car €18.50; ☎ Apr-Sep; ♿) There are tranquil wooded hills out the back of this four-star place, but there's a busy motorway in front. It's 2km southeast of town, at Pont des Trois Sautets. Take bus 3 to Les Trois Sautets stop.

Hôtel La Caravelle (☎ 04 42 21 53 05; www.lacaravelle-hotel.com; 29 bd du Roi René; s €45, d €65-70) Central, serviceable and friendly, the 30 rooms here range from air-conditioned doubles overlooking a pretty (and sadly, neighbouring) garden to singles with toilets situated just outside the rooms. The hotel is on the southeastern ring; if you're driving you can pull up to drop off your luggage right out front. Wi-fi's free and wheelchair access is good.

Hôtel Concorde (☎ 04 42 26 03 95; 68 bd du Roi René; d €48-88; ♿) Definitely ask for a room at the back if you don't want to be sung to sleep by the incessant traffic noise of the circular boulevard. The 50 rooms are functional, with good wheelchair access; 10 have small balconies, and higher-priced rooms come with air-con. Handy on-site parking is available for €7.50.

MIDRANGE

Hôtel des Quatre Dauphins (☎ 04 42 38 16 39; www.lesquatredauphins.fr; 54 rue Roux Alphéran; s €55-65, d €65-100; ♿) Close to cours Mirabeau, this sweet 13-room hotel is a symphony of Wedgwood-blue, pale-pink and beige. The tall terracotta-tiled staircase leads to four charming attic rooms with sloped beamed ceilings (although maybe not ideal if you're pushing 6ft tall).

Hôtel Cardinal (☎ 04 42 38 32 30; www.hotel-cardinal-aix.com; 24 rue Cardinale; d €70, self-catering ste €110) Beneath stratospheric ceilings, Hôtel Cardinal's 29 romantic rooms are beautifully furnished with antiques, tasselled curtains, and newly tiled bathrooms. The choice picks are the six gigantic suites located in the annexe (about 100m further up the street), each with a kitchenette and dining room, ideal for longer stays.

Hôtel Saint-Christophe (☎ 04 42 26 01 24; www.hotel-saintchristophe.com; 2 av Victor Hugo; s €78.20-84.50, d €84.50-113; ♿) Discreetly art deco and resolutely central (it's right behind the tourist office), the Saint-Christophe has very helpful staff, good wheelchair access, free wi-fi and a few rooms with private terraces. Brasserie Léopold (mains €15 to €20, open for lunch and dinner Tuesday to Sunday) downstairs is a sure bet for *steak-frites* (steak and fries).

Grand Hôtel Nègre Coste (☎ 04 42 27 74 22; www.hotelnegrecoste.com; 33 cours Mirabeau; d €90-145; ♿) The only hotel right on cours Mirabeau isn't as grand as when Louis XIV stayed here in 1660. The place is a bit musty and the service blasé, but rooms still have a grand air about them, and it doesn't get more central than this. Garage parking is €10.

TOP END

Hôtel des Augustins (☎ 04 42 27 28 59; www.hotel-augustins.com; 3 rue de la Masse; standard/superior d €97-240; ♿) Aix' oldest signature establishment has been resting, somewhat, on its laurels: the welcome is lukewarm, and the rooms, – in contrast with the grand lobby – are a little underwhelming (save for the most luxurious ones with Jacuzzi and private terrace). It's a shame, because this former 15th-century convent has volumes of history.

Hôtel Cézanne (☎ 04 42 91 11 11; www.hotelaix.com; 40 av Victor Hugo; d €170-195; ♿) Apart from the beautifully crafted designer rooms and artistic surroundings, perhaps the best thing about Aix' hippest pad is the breakfast: smoked salmon and Champagne (bring on the Buck's Fizz!),

as well as other more traditional treats such as delicate preserves, fresh bread and pastries.

Eating

You will be spoilt for choice in Aix: the centre runneth over with eateries, bistros, restaurants and gourmet haunts.

Le Formal (☎ 04 42 27 08 31; 32 rue Espariat; mains from €14; ☺ lunch & dinner Tue-Fri, dinner Sat; ☒) The street entrance is rather discreet, but chef Jean-Luc Le Formal has received much attention since he opened his restaurant. The food is fantastic and elegantly presented but the portions err on the stingy side and the decibel level can get in the way of conversation.

Charlotte (☎ 04 42 26 77 56; 32 rue des Bernardines; 2-/3-course menu €14/17.50; ☺ lunch & dinner Tue-Sat) Townspeople congregate like a big extended family at this bustling place. It turns out delicious, simple home cooking, including terrines, homemade soups, grilled meat and savoury tarts, from its open kitchen. In summer, feasting takes place outdoors in the garden.

Le Zinc d'Hugo (☎ 04 42 27 69 69; 22 rue Lieutaud; mains €14-18; ☺ lunch & dinner Tue-Sat; ☒) This rustic bistro of stone walls, wooden tables and a blackboard menu chalked with daily specials gets a little overwhelmed on market days when shoppers come up for the €14 lunchtime *menu*. You'll leave smelling as though you've been cooking all day, but that's the price to pay for authenticity!

Icone (☎ 04 42 27 59 82; 3 rue Frédéric Mistral; 2-/3-course menu €15/25; ☺ lunch & dinner Mon-Sat; ☒) The designer Italian/Mediterranean fare matches the sleek, muted grey and glass setting at this glam place just off cours Mirabeau. There's a stainless steel bar and DJ spinning electro lounge beats if you'd rather sip a cocktail than devour lobster raviolis.

Le Petit Verdot (☎ 04 42 27 30 12; 7 rue Entrecasteaux; menu €17; ☺ dinner Mon-Sat; ☒) At this cosy, wine-case-decorated establishment you'll choose food to accompany your wine (not the other way around). The wine list includes 100-odd choices, through which the staff will expertly guide you. And rest assured, the elegant French fare on your plate (mostly succulent meats, from duck breast to lamb shanks, including pig trotters!) will be just as divine as your tippie of choice.

La Chimère Café (☎ 04 42 38 30 00; 15 rue Brueys; 3-course menu €29.50; ☺ dinner Mon-Sat) Aix' yuppies lap up the cabaret atmosphere of this former nightclub: starry-night vaulted ceiling

in the underground room; grand chandeliers with crimson, velvety furnishings above. As for the plate, it's a festival of decadent treats: crunchy *Pont l'Évêque* (a pale yellow, cow's-milk cheese) in cider caramel; cocoa-saturated fondant; scallops; lamb or whole sea bream.

Amphitryon (☎ 04 42 26 54 10; 2-4 rue Paul Doumer; 3-course menu €37; ☺ lunch & dinner Tue-Sat) Run by fiery duo maître d' Patrice Lesné and chef Bruno Ungaro, Amphitryon enjoys a solid reputation among Aix' bourgeoisie, particularly in summer for alfresco dining in the cloister-garden. The attached Comptoir de l'Amphi (mains €12 to €14) is a less-expensive alternative.

SELF-CATERING

Fresh, often still-warm loaves cram the shelves of **La Boulangerie du Coïn** (4 rue Boulegon; ☺ Tue-Sun). It's also one of the few *boulangeries* (bakeries) to bake on Sunday, along with the **boulangerie** (5 rue Tournefort; ☺ 24hr) that never closes.

Aix is blessed with bountiful markets – see opposite.

Pick up groceries at **Monoprix** (cours Mirabeau; ☺ 8.30am-9pm Mon-Sat) and **Petit Casino** (rue d'Italie; ☺ 9am-7pm Mon-Sat).

Drinking

Open-air cafés saturate the city's squares, especially place des Cardeurs, place de Verdun and place de l'Hôtel de Ville.

Les Deux Garçons (☎ 04 42 26 00 51; 53 cours Mirabeau; ☺ 7am-2am) This is where Cézanne and Zola used to hang out, but this claim to fame no longer draws crowds like it used to. It's still a pleasant spot for a drink or a quiet bite, given its prime cours Mirabeau location.

L'Orienté (5 rue de Félibre Gaut; ☺ 1pm-1am) A *1001 Nights'* soft-lit den ideal for lounge music, *sheeshas* (water pipes), dozens of different teas and a Zen atmosphere.

Entertainment

Flip through a copy of the monthly *In Aix* (free from the tourist office) to find out what's on, where.

CINEMAS

Aix' arty-intellectual student population ensures great cinema offerings, from Oscar contenders to cult flicks, often in English. Programs for the following cinemas can be found at www.lescinemasaixois.com (in French):

Ciné Mazarin (☎ 04 42 26 61 51; 6 rue Laroque; adult/student €8.10/7.10)

Cinéma Renoir (☎ 04 42 26 61 51; 24 cours Mirabeau; adult/student €8.10/7.10)

Le Cézanne (☎ 04 42 26 61 51; 1 rue Marcel Guillaume; adult/student €8.90/7.30)

BARS & NIGHTCLUBS

Like all good student cities, the scene here is fun, but fickle. The areas on and around rue de la Verrerie and place Richelme (both about 300m north of cours Mirabeau) are prime for nightlife. Listings on the website www.marseille.bynight.com (in French) also cover Aix.

La Belle Époque (☎ 04 42 27 65 66; 29 cours Mirabeau; ☎ 11am-midnight) The swanky, purple and fluoro-lit Belle Époque decor is a favourite of happening DJs and students alike. And don't be surprised if you receive two drinks when you've ordered just one; it's 'appy 'our between 7pm and 9pm every night.

L'Unic (☎ 04 42 96 38 28; 40 rue de Vauvargues; ☎ 6am-2am) On one of the town's most charming squares, place Richelme, L'Unic is a timeless, reliable address serving anything from breakfast to *apéritifs*, cocktails and beers. Pensioners love it for the postmarket pre-lunch slot, while students crowd it to kick-start or simply while away their evening.

Shopping

Aix' chic-est shops are clustered along pedestrian rue Marius Reynaud, which winds behind the Palais de Justice on place de Verdun. Elegant boutiques also grace cours Mirabeau.

Local wine vendors include **Cave du Félibrige** (18 rue des Cordeliers), which has a splendid array – some *very* expensive.

MARKETS

Trestle tables set up each morning for a **produce market** (place Richelme), displaying olives, goats' cheese, garlic, lavender, honey, peaches, melons and other sun-kissed products. Another **food market** (place des Prêcheurs) takes place on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday mornings.

Rainbows of flowers fill place des Prêcheurs during the Sunday-morning flower market,

and place de l'Hôtel de Ville on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday mornings. Quirky vintage items can also be found at the flea market (Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday mornings) on place de Verdun.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Aéroport Marseille-Provence (☎ 04 42 14 14 14; www.marseille.aeroport.fr), aka Aéroport Marseille-Marignane, is 25km from Aix-en-Provence and is served by regular shuttle buses.

BUS

Aix' **bus station** (☎ 08 91 02 40 25; av de l'Europe) is a 10-minute walk southwest from La Rotonde. Services include buses to Marseille (€4.60, 30 to 50 minutes depending on the traffic, every 10 minutes, every 20 minutes on Sunday), Arles (€10.40, 1½ hours, six daily Monday to Saturday), Avignon (€14, 1¼ hours, six daily Monday to Saturday) and Toulon (€10, one hour, five daily Monday to Saturday).

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

Circumnavigating the one-way, three-lane orbital system circling the old town is a nightmare. Street parking spaces are like hen's teeth, but secure, pricier covered parking is plentiful.

TRAIN

Aix' tiny **city centre train station** (☎ 7am-7pm) is at the southern end of av Victor Hugo. The only services there are those to Briançon (€32.90, four hours), Gap (€25, 2½ hours) and Marseille (€6.50, 50 minutes).

Aix' **TGV station**, 8km from the city centre and accessible by shuttle bus, has many more services. From there it's only 12 minutes to Marseille (€8), with about 20 services a day.

Getting Around

TO/FROM THE AIRPORT & TGV STATION

Aix' bus station is linked to both the TGV station (€3.70) and the airport (€7.90) from

SWEET TREAT

Aix' sweetest treat since King René's wedding banquet in 1473 is the marzipanlike local speciality, *calisson d'Aix*, a small, diamond-shaped, chewy delicacy made with ground almonds and fruit syrup, wrapped in a communion-wafer base and glazed with white icing sugar. Traditional *calissonniers* still make the sweets, including **Roy René** (☎ 04 42 26 67 86; www.calisson.com; 10 rue Clémenceau), which also runs guided **tours** (€1; ☎ 10am Tue & Thu) at its out-of-town factory-museum.

A GREEN GIANT

If you've been thinking about organising a big family reunion, or there's a group of you looking to rent somewhere a little unusual for a holiday in Provence, look no further: **Le Loubatas** (☎ 04 42 67 06 70; <http://educ-envir.org/loubatas>; Peyrolles-en-Provence; 6 nights incl sheets €650) might be just what you need.

Nestled in a beautiful Mediterranean forest 25km from Aix-en-Provence, at the crossroads of the Montagne Ste-Victoire, the Luberon and the Gorges du Verdon, Le Loubatas is a unique *eco-gîte* (eco-B&B). Designed using eco-friendly methods and materials, solar panels provide hot water, heating and electricity, while water comes from rainwater tanks and a local spring (the pump is solar powered).

Inside are dozens of interactive and highly informative gadgets to calculate and reduce electricity and water usage, including funky looking meters, cartoon reminders, timers etc.

The *gîte* has a capacity of 35 but it can be rented for smaller groups, starting at 12 people. Rooms are basic colourful dorms with bunk beds and communal showers. In the kitchen, recycling and composting are de rigueur. Dinner is served in the dining room, where an energy-efficient wood-stove keeps the place warm as toast in winter, or on the lovely terrace overlooking the forest in summer.

4.40am to 10.30pm by the half-hourly **Navette** (☎ 04 42 93 59 13) shuttle-bus services.

BUS

The city's 14 bus and three minibus lines are operated by **Aix en Bus** (☎ 04 42 26 37 28; 🕒 8.30am-7pm Mon-Sat). The information desk is inside the tourist office.

La Rotonde is the main bus hub. Most services run until 8pm. A single *carnet* (book) of 10 tickets costs €1.10/7.70; a day pass costs €3.50. Minibus 2 links the train station with La Rotonde and cours Mirabeau. The Diabline electric shuttles go round Vieil Aix; flag them down for €0.50.

TAXI

You can find taxis outside the bus station. To order one, call **Taxi Radio Aixois** (☎ 04 42 27 71 11) or **Taxi Mirabeau** (☎ 04 42 21 61 61).

ARLES & THE CAMARGUE

ARLES

pop 52,400

Arles' poster boy is the celebrated impressionist painter Vincent van Gogh. If you're familiar with his work, you'll be familiar with Arles: the light, the colours, the landmarks, the atmosphere – all faithfully captured.

But long before Van Gogh captured this Grand Rhône River spot on canvas, the Romans had already been turned on to its charms. In 49 BC, Arles' prosperity and political standing rose meteorically when it

backed a winner in Julius Caesar (who would never meet defeat in his entire career). After Caesar seized and plundered Marseille, which had supported his rival Pompey the Great, Arles eclipsed Marseille as the region's major port. Within a century and a half, it boasted a 12,000-seat theatre and a 20,000-seat amphitheatre to entertain its citizens with gruesome gladiatorial spectacles and chariot races.

Still impressively intact, the two structures now stage events including Arles' famous *ferias* (bull-running festivals), with their controversial bullfights and three-day street parties.

Arles' cultural significance was confirmed by its nomination as European Capital of Culture for 2013 along with Marseille and Aix-en-Provence.

Orientation

Arles is shoehorned between the Grand Rhône River to the northwest, bd Émile Combes to the east and, to the south, bd des Lices and bd Georges Clemenceau. The city centre is shaped like a foot, with the train station, place de la Libération and place Lamartine (where Van Gogh once lived) at the top, les Arènes at the anklebone and the tourist office under the arch. And – fittingly enough – its compact size means it's easily walkable.

Information

INTERNET ACCESS

Cyber Saladelle (☎ 04 90 93 13 56; 17 rue de la République; per hr €3.50; 🕒 10am-7pm Tue-Sat)

LAUNDRY

Laverie Mièle (12bis rue Portagnol; ☎ 8am-7pm)

MONEY

There are several banks along rue de la République.

POST

Post Office (5 bd des Lices)

TOURIST INFORMATION

Tourist Office main office (☎ 04 90 18 41 20; www.tourisme.ville-arles.fr; esplanade Charles de Gaulle; ☎ 9am-6.45pm Apr-Sep, 9am-4.45pm Mon-Sat, 10am-12.45pm Sun Oct-Mar); train station (☎ 04 90 43 33 57; ☎ 9am-1.30pm & 2.30-4.45pm Mon-Fri Apr-Sep) The main office is adjacent to the busy bd des Lices.

Sights & Activities

Unless otherwise noted, the last entry to all sights listed in this section is 30 minutes prior to closing.

ROMAN MONUMENTS

If you're keen to dig into Arles' Roman past, the 'Circuit Romain' combined ticket costing €9/7 for adults/children gives you access to the four following sites. The Pass Monument (€13.50/12) gives you access to all the museums and sites in Arles. You can buy the ticket at the tourist office or at any of the sites.

Les Arènes

Arles' remarkable Roman amphitheatre, **Les Arènes** (☎ 04 90 49 59 05; adult/student €5.50/4; ☎ 9am-6.30pm May-Sep, 9am-6pm Mar, Apr & Oct, 10am-5pm Nov-Feb), was built around the late 1st or early 2nd century. It was the venue for chariot races, and gladiatorial displays where slaves and criminals met their demise before jubilant crowds.

During the Arab invasions of early medieval times, the amphitheatre became a fortress. When it was decided in the 1820s to finally return it to its original state, there were still 212 houses and two churches on site. The amphitheatre is now undergoing restoration, but the polished finish of the renovated walls isn't popular with everyone. Debate is ongoing about what should be done to the metallic structure inside that seats 12,000 during Arles' bullfighting season (see boxed text, p829).

The *bureau de location* (ticket office) is on the northern side of the amphitheatre on rond point des Arènes.

Thermes de Constantin

Admission to the amphitheatre is also good for the **Thermes de Constantin** (rue du Grand Prieuré; adult/student €3/2.20; ☎ 9am-noon & 2-6.30pm May-Sep, 9am-noon & 2-6pm Mar, Apr & Oct, 10am-noon & 2-5pm Feb & Nov), partly preserved Roman baths near the river, built for Emperor Constantin's private use in the 4th century.

Théâtre Antique

Still regularly used for projections and plays, the **Théâtre Antique** (Roman Theatre; ☎ 04 90 49 59 05; entrance is on rue de la Calade; adult/student €3/2.20; ☎ 9am-6.30pm May-Sep, 9am-noon & 2-6pm Mar, Apr & Oct, 10am-noon & 2-5pm Nov-Feb) dates from the end of the 1st century BC. For hundreds of years it was used as a convenient source of construction materials, with workers chipping away at the 102m-diameter structure (the remaining column on the right-hand side near the entrance indicates the height of the original arcade).

Les Alyscamps

Works of Van Gogh and Gauguin feature this large **neropolis** (adult/student €3.50/2.60; ☎ 9am-6.30pm May-Sep, 9am-noon & 2-6pm Mar, Apr & Oct, 10am-noon & 2-5pm Nov-Feb). Situated 1km southeast of Les Arènes, it was founded by the Romans and taken over by Christians in the 4th century. It became a coveted resting place because of the tombs of martyr St Genest and Arles' first bishops.

Other Roman Sites

Under your feet as you stand on the place du Forum are the **Cryptoporticus du Forum** (entrance via Hôtel de Ville, place de la République; adult/student €5.50/4, incl entrance to amphitheatre; ☎ 9am-noon & 2-6.30pm May-Sep, 9am-noon & 2-6pm Oct, 9am-12.30pm & 2-6pm Mar & Apr, 10am-noon & 2-5pm Nov-Feb), underground store-rooms carved out in the 1st century BC.

ÉGLISE ST-TROPHIME

Arles was an archbishopric from the 4th century until 1790, and this Romanesque-style **church** was once a cathedral. Built in the late 11th and 12th centuries on the site of several earlier churches, it's named after St Trophime, a late-2nd- or early-3rd-century bishop of Arles. If you look on the far right of the left-hand side of the western portal, you'll see an intricately sculpted facade of biblical scenes (more spectacular than the interior), with St Trophime holding a spiral staff in his right hand. Inside the austere church,

ARLES

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INFORMATION		EATING 🍴	
Cyber Saladelle.....	1 A4	Au Jardin du Calendal.....	(see 18)
Laverie Miele.....	2 D3	Café la Nut.....	22 B4
Post Office.....	3 C5	Comptoir du Sud.....	23 B5
Tourist Office.....	4 B5	Corazon.....	24 B3
		La Mule Blanche.....	25 B5
		Le 16.....	26 B4
		Le Cilantro.....	27 C4
		Monoprix.....	28 D2
SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES		DRINKING 🍺	
Cloître St-Trophime.....	5 B4	L'Australian Café Walla Beer.....	29 B5
Cryptoporticus du Forum.....	6 B4	Oli Pan.....	(see 18)
Église St-Trophime.....	7 B4	Paddy Mullins.....	30 B5
Espace Van Gogh.....	8 B5	SHOPPING 🛍️	
Fondation Vincent Van Gogh.....	9 C4	Christian Lacroix.....	31 B4
Les Arènes Bureau de		Puyricard.....	32 B4
Location.....	10 C3	TRANSPORT	
Musée Réattu.....	11 B3	Bus Station.....	33 B5
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Théâtre Antique.....	13 C4		
Thermes de Constantin.....	14 B3		
SLEEPING 🏠			
Cuisine & Tradition.....	15 D3		
Grand Hôtel Nord Pinus.....	16 B4		
Hôtel Arlaten.....	17 B3		
Hôtel Calendal.....	18 C4		
Hôtel de l'Amphithéâtre.....	19 C4		
Hôtel du Musée.....	20 B3		
Hôtel Le Cloître.....	21 C4		

200 m
0.1 miles

the most fascinating feature is the 'treasure', containing pieces of bone of Arles' bishops who were later canonised. Many of the broken statues inside were decapitated during the French Revolution.

Across the courtyard, the 12th- and 14th-century **Cloître St-Trophime** (St-Trophime Cloister; ☎ 04 90 49 36 36; adult/student €3.50/2.60; 🕒 9am-6.30pm

May-Sep, 9am-6pm Mar, Apr & Oct, 10am-5pm Nov-Feb) was built to accommodate the monks' daily lives. It comprises a reading room, dormitory and dining room.

MUSEUMS

Within a striking, state-of-the-art cobalt-blue building, the **Musée de l'Arles et de la Provence**

OF BULLS AND MEN

Animal lovers, fear not: some *corridas* (bullfights) do not end in a bloodbath. Usually, bulls are killed in a colourful and bloody spectacle involving *picadors* (horseback-riding bullfighters who use a lance), *banderilleros* (bullfighters who run close the bull, and use the *banderilla* – a type of dart), *matadors* and horses. When performed correctly – which is rarely the case – the *matador* and bull execute a kind of dance. After the event, the bull is carved up and sold for meat. The meat has a different taste from that of ordinary steers, as bulls bred for fighting graze free range, on grass.

However, in the local Camargue variation, the *course Camarguaise*, amateur *razeteurs* (from the word *razer*, 'shave') get as close as they dare to the bulls to remove rosettes and ribbons tied to the bull's horns. They do this using hooks held between their fingers. The bulls are local *camarguais* bulls, smaller and faster than their Spanish counterparts used in *corridas*.

Arles' bullfighting season begins around Easter with a festival known as the *Feria* (or *Féria*) *Pascale*, and changes through until the September rice harvest festival.

Antiques (☎ 04 90 18 88 88; av de la 1ère Division Française; adult/student/under 18yr €5.50/4/free; 🕒 9am-7pm May-Oct, 10am-5pm Nov-Apr) is perched on the edge of what used to be the Roman chariot racing track (circus), 1.5km southwest of the tourist office. It has amassed a rich collection of pagan and Christian art, including stunning mosaics. The museum is also a leading mosaic restoration centre; you can watch the work in progress.

Museon Arlaten (☎ 04 90 93 58 11; 29 rue de la République; adult/student €4/3; 🕒 9.30am-12.30pm & 2-6pm Jun-Aug, 9.30am-noon & 2-5.30pm Apr, May & Sep, 9.30am-noon & 2-4.30pm Oct-Mar) was founded by Nobel Prize-winning poet and dedicated Provençal preservationist Frédéric Mistral as a 'poem' for people who couldn't read. It occupies a 16th-century townhouse, with displays of traditional Provençal furniture, crafts, costumes, ceramics and wigs. It looks a bit dated now, but has retained a certain quaint charm. The last entry is one hour prior to closing.

Housed in a former 15th-century priory, the splendid **Musée Réattu** (☎ 04 90 96 37 68; 10 rue du Grand Prieuré; adult/student €4/3, temporary exhibitions €6/4.50; 🕒 10am-12.30pm & 2-6.30pm Mar-Jun & mid-Sep-Oct, 10am-7pm Jul–mid-Sep, 1-5pm Nov-Feb) has two Picasso paintings, and 57 of his sketches from the early 1970s. It also has works by 18th- and 19th-century Provençal artists, but it's best known for its cutting-edge photographic displays.

VAN GOGH SIGHTS

Although Van Gogh painted around 200 canvases in Arles, not a single one remains here today. There's a certain poetic justice, considering that following his altercation with housemate Paul Gauguin in place Victor Hugo (see

boxed text, p830), a petition was raised by fearful neighbours, and Van Gogh was committed for one month on the mayor's orders.

But Arles has admirably made up for it. Fitting tributes to Van Gogh's art include **Fondation Vincent Van Gogh** (☎ 04 90 49 94 04; 24bis Rond Point des Arènes; adult/student €7/5; 🕒 10am-6pm Apr-Jun, 10am-7pm Jul-Sep, 11am-5pm Tue-Sun Oct-Mar), where important modern-day artists, including David Hockney, Francis Bacon and Fernando Botero, pay homage to the artist's distinctive style. The collection and its diversity show just how widely Van Gogh's influence has been felt in the artistic world.

Temporary art exhibitions regularly take place at **Espace Van Gogh** (☎ 04 90 49 37 40; place Félix Rey), housed in the former hospital where Van Gogh had his ear stitched and was later locked up.

The best way to get a sense of Van Gogh's time in Arles is to take the excellent **Van Gogh Trail**, a walking circuit of the city marked by footpath-embedded plaques. Accompanied by a brochure (in English) handed out by the tourist office, the trail takes in spots where Van Gogh set up his easel to paint canvases such as *Starry Night over the Rhône* (1888) and *The Amphitheatre* (1888). At each stop along the circuit, a lectern-style signboard with a reproduction of the painting has interpretative information (also in English).

Tours

In addition to the Van Gogh Trail, several other self-guided walking tours (Roman, medieval, Renaissance and classical) are marked along Arles' footpaths, in conjunction with an explanatory brochure.

VINCENT

It's easy to forget that Vincent van Gogh was only 37 when he died, as he appears much older in his self-portraits. His aged appearance may have been partly due to the effects of poverty – he sold only one painting in his lifetime.

Born in 1853, the Dutch painter arrived in Arles in 1888 after living in Paris with his younger brother Theo, an art dealer who financially supported Vincent from his own modest income. In Paris he became acquainted with seminal artists Edgar Degas, Camille Pissarro, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec and Paul Gauguin. Revelling in Arles' intense light and bright colours, Van Gogh painted with a burning fervour, unfazed by howling mistrals. During a mistral he would kneel on his canvases and paint horizontally, or lash his easel to iron stakes driven deep into the ground. He sent paintings to Theo for him to try to sell, and dreamed of founding an artists' colony here, but only Gauguin followed up his invitation. Their differing artistic approaches – Gauguin believed in painting from imagination, Van Gogh painting what he saw – and their artistic temperaments, fuelled by absinthe, came to a head with the argument that led to Van Gogh lopping his ear, and his subsequent committal.

In May 1889 Van Gogh voluntarily entered an asylum in St-Rémy de Provence, 25km northeast of Arles over the Alpilles. It was here that he painted another 150-odd canvases during his one year, one week, and one day's confinement, including masterpieces like *Starry Night* (not to be confused with *Starry Night over the Rhône*, painted in Arles). In February 1890 his 1888 Arles-painted work *The Red Vines* was bought by Anne Boch, sister of his friend Eugene Boch, for 400 francs (around €50 today). It also now hangs in the Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts.

On 16 May 1890 Van Gogh moved to Auvers-sur-Oise, just outside Paris, to be closer to Theo. However, on 27 July that year he shot and killed himself, possibly to avoid further financial burden for his brother, whose wife had just had a baby son (named Vincent). Theo was also supporting their ailing mother. He subsequently had a breakdown and was also committed, prior to succumbing to physical illness. He died, aged 33, just six months after Van Gogh. It would be less than a decade before Van Gogh's talent would start to achieve wide recognition, with major museums acquiring his works.

From July to September the tourist office runs thematic guided tours for around €6 for two hours, with the Vieil Arles tour in English on Saturdays at 5pm, and the Van Gogh tour on Tuesdays at 5pm.

Festivals & Events

Feria Pascale Around Easter, Arles heralds the beginning of the bullfighting season with this festival.

Fête des Gardians Held in May, this festival sees the crowning of the Queen of Arles, Camargue cowboys parading through the streets of town, and Camargue games in the amphitheatre.

Fêtes d'Arles From around the end of June, dance, theatre, music and poetry readings feature during this two-week festival.

Fête des Prémices du Riz This 10-day-long festival, held in September, marks the start of the rice harvest. The tourist office has detailed information.

Les Rencontres Internationales de la Photographie (International Photography Festival; www.rencontres-arles.com) In early July, this festival attracts photographers from around the world, with works displayed until September.

Sleeping

Except during festivals, bullfights and July and August, Arles has plenty of reasonably priced accommodation, including very good-value triple and quadruple rooms. Most hotels shut during January, if not during the entire low season – check ahead. There are lots of **gîtes ruraux** (☎ reservations 04 90 59 49 40) in the surrounding countryside, especially in the Camargue. Ask the tourist office for a list.

BUDGET

Auberge de Jeunesse (☎ 04 90 96 18 25; www.fuaj.org; 20 av Maréchal Foch; dm incl breakfast & sheets €15.20; ☹ Feb–mid-Dec) This sunlit, 100-bed place, made up of eight-bed dorms, is just 10 minutes' walk from the centre. There is a bar but it closes at 11pm, just like the hostel's gates (except during *ferias*).

Camping City (☎ 04 90 93 08 86; www.camping-city.com; 67 rte de Crau; camping per site €16; ☹ Apr–Sep; ☹) This slightly out-of-centre campsite is the closest to town, 1.5km southeast on the road to Marseille. There are a couple of very

big supermarkets nearby, and there's a pool on-site. Take bus 2 to the Hermite stop.

MIDRANGE

Hôtel du Musée (☎ 04 90 93 88 88; www.hoteldu-musee.com; 11 rue du Grand Prieuré; d €48-68, tr & q €65-85; ☒ closed mid-Jan–mid-Feb; ♿) The 28 rooms in this gorgeous 12th- to 13th-century building are all individually decorated and have been fitted with brand-new bathrooms. The €7 buffet breakfast is a steal, particularly in summer when you can savour it on the sun-filled flower-decked patios.

our pick **Hôtel Le Cloître** (☎ 04 90 96 29 50; www.hoteldcloitre.com; 16 rue du Cloître; d €50-70, tr/q €70/80; ☒ mid-Mar–Oct) It has taken 18 years of painstaking renovation to get this old convent to be in its current stunning state. The wonderful Jean-François and Agnès (both sources of local information) will happily show you the 'before-and-after' photo album as well as some of the treasures they've unearthed (17th-century murals, traces of 12th-century paint, old doors etc). The rooms all feel like a little piece of history, from the grand dining room to rooms 18 and 20 with their prized views of the stone and marble St-Trophime cloister.

Hôtel de l'Amphithéâtre (☎ 04 90 96 10 30; www.hotel-amphitheatre.fr; 5-7 rue Diderot; d €55-95; ♿) Right near the hotel's namesake Roman amphitheatre, deep crimson decor dresses the steadfast, solid bones of this 1600s-built hotel. The building has kept many of its grand 17th-century features such as a monumental fireplace and imposing stone staircases. Wheelchair access is good and there is free wi-fi.

Hôtel Calendal (☎ 04 90 96 11 89; www.lecalendal.com; 5 rue Porte de Laure; d €69-149; ☒ closed Jan; ♿) Next to the amphitheatre and overlooking the Théâtre Antique, this picture of a place has good wheelchair access, and sports 38 rooms with beamed ceilings and bright Provençal fabrics. There's a peaceful garden terrace at the back with a giant chessboard, and a brand new spa.

Cuisine & Tradition (☎ 04 90 49 69 20; www.cuisine-provencale.com; 11 rue Portagnel; d incl breakfast €70) Initially set up to house chef Érick Vedel's cooking students, the five colour-themed rooms have a quaint romantic feel with their grand beds, draped curtains and open bathrooms. The top-floor room has great views of the Arènes. Breakfast is a delicious home-made affair. Érick runs weekend or week-long courses, and can customise half-day courses

for as little as two people (€250 for a half day; €100 per person for three or more people).

Hôtel Arlatan (☎ 04 90 93 56 66; www.hotel-arlatan.fr; 26 rue du Sauvage; d €85-155; ☒ closed mid-Jan–mid-Feb; ♿) The heated swimming pool, pretty garden and plush rooms decorated with antique furniture are just some of the things going for this hotel. Add to that a setting steeped in history, with Roman foundations visible through a glass floor in the lobby and 15th-century paintings on one of the lounges' ceilings; this is a very classy choice. Good wheelchair access.

TOP END

Grand Hôtel Nord Pinus (☎ 04 90 93 44 44; www.nord-pinus.com; place du Forum; d €160-295; ♿) Drawing on the town's Roma and Spanish heritage, this intimate hotel is lined with vintage *feria* posters and paraphernalia. The musical ambience is flamenco. The stunning room 10, nicknamed 'room of the matadors' is where many famous matadors have stayed (and still stay). The bar downstairs has been decorated with amazing B&W Peter Beard photographs of African wildlife.

Eating

Arles' restaurant terraces give even the most upmarket eating establishments a relaxed café atmosphere. The Roman place du Forum, shaded by outstretched plane trees, turns into a giant dining table at lunch and dinner during summer. It's also where you'll find **Café la Nuit**, thought to be the café captured on canvas by Van Gogh in his *Café Terrace at Night* (1888), now mostly a tourist trap.

Comptoir du Sud (☎ 04 90 96 22 17; 2 rue Jean Jaurès) Overlooking place de la République, this place is good for a quick bite. It sells wonderful gourmet sandwiches (tasty chutneys, succulent meat, foie gras) and divine little salads, all at rock-bottom prices.

Au Jardin du Calendal (☎ 04 90 96 11 89; 22 place Pomme; mains €11-19; ☒ lunch Tue-Sun May-Oct) Gaspacho, hummus, marinated red mullet fillets, salmon and dill terrine, organic red Camargue rice and a good cheese and dessert selection – Hôtel Calendal's restaurant is summer bliss for its wholesome fresh food as much as for its lush garden setting. It also serves afternoon tea, with scrumptious cakes.

La Mule Blanche (☎ 04 90 93 98 54; 8 rue du Président Wilson; mains €12.20-20; ☒ lunch Tue-Sun, dinner Wed-Sun summer, lunch Tue-Sat, dinner Wed-Sat winter) Jazz

is often performed at the piano in the White Mule's domed interior, but the hottest tables are on the pavement terrace, the prettiest in town, perfect to savour a king-size salad or simple Mediterranean fare.

Le 16 (☎ 04 90 93 77 36; 16 rue du Docteur Fanton; mains €15; ☎ lunch & dinner Mon-Fri, lunch Sat) Stripy tablecloths and candle-lit tables create a wonderfully warm atmosphere in which to savour the southwestern cuisine on your plate. Service is charming, and on most evenings a Jacques Brel-inspired singer comes in to scratch a tune or two on his guitar.

Corazón (☎ 04 90 96 32 53; 1bis rue Réattu; mains €18-25; ☎ lunch & dinner Tue-Sat) This funky, crimson space in a recessed arcade combines a contemporary art gallery with a modern European restaurant. The restaurant serves fare as imaginative as the interior (the furniture is for sale, by the way): seafood sauerkraut, rabbit ravioli with pumpkin sauce or liquorice and rum lamb shoulder. Blimey.

Le Cilantro (☎ 04 90 18 25 05; 31 rue Porte de Laure; mains €32; ☎ lunch Tue-Fri & Sun, dinner Tue-Sat) Arles' most buzzing tables are a result of the homecoming of Arlésian chef Jérôme Laurent, cooking accomplished dishes that change seasonally – ginger or cocoa pigeon, lard-roasted potatoes (yum!) and excellent veggie courses, too.

SELF-CATERING

Amble around the Saturday morning **market** (bd Georges Clemenceau & bd des Lices) that stretches the length of the main boulevard selling strong cheese, Camargue salt, olive oil and bull sausages. On Wednesday, market stalls set up along bd Émile Combes (east of Les Arènes).

Pick up groceries at **Monoprix** (place Lamartine; ☎ 8.30am-7.30pm Mon-Sat).

Drinking

Oli Pan (☎ 04 90 96 11 89; 5 rue Porte de Laure; dishes €3-10; ☎ 9am-7pm) The latest addition to the café scene, Le Calendal's new crowd-pleaser has organic sandwiches, Mövenpick ice creams, bottled beers and free wi-fi, all served on the great sunset-facing terrace or inside in a fresh candy-coloured room.

L'Australian Café Walla Beer (☎ 04 90 97 22 17; 7 rue Molière) Arles is pretty quiet at night outside of *ferias*, but this place is popular for an evening drink on the terrace that overlooks bd Clemenceau.

Paddy Mullins (☎ 04 90 49 67 25; 5 bd Georges Clemenceau; ☎ 10am-2am) An Irish-style pub featuring regular live music. It's not the most genuine of pubs, but it brings some welcome oomph to an otherwise staid Arles.

Shopping

Next door to the first-ever boutique of home-grown fashion designer **Christian Lacroix** (52 rue de la République) is **Puyricard** (54 rue de la République), purveying exquisite Provençal chocolates.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Nîmes airport (p765) is 20km northwest of the city on the A54. There is no public transport between the airport and Arles.

BUS

The **bus station** (☎ 08 10 00 08 16; 24 bd Georges Clemenceau; ☎ 8.30am-noon & 2-5.30pm Mon-Fri) is served by companies including **Telleschi** (☎ 04 42 28 40 22), which runs services to/from Aix-en-Provence (€10.40, 1½ hours). Buses to Nîmes take one hour (€6.60).

Buses also link Arles with various parts of the Camargue, including Les Stes-Maries-de-la-Mer (€5.20, one hour).

TRAIN

Some major rail destinations from Arles' **train station** (☎ information office 9am-12.30pm & 2-6pm) include Nîmes (€7.20, 30 minutes), Marseille (€12.70, 55 minutes) and Avignon (€6.30, 20 minutes).

Getting Around

BUS

Local buses are operated by **Star** (☎ 08 10 40 08 16; information office 24 bd Georges Clemenceau; ☎ 8.30am-noon & 2-5.30pm Mon-Fri). Star's office, situated west of the tourist office, is the main bus hub, although most buses also stop at place Lamartine, a short walk south of the train station. Star buses run from 6.30am to 7.30pm Monday to Saturday, and 9.30am to 5pm on Sunday. A single ticket costs €0.80. In addition to its 11 bus lines, Star runs free minibuses called *Starlets*, which make a circle around most of the old city every 30 minutes from 7.10am to 7.10pm Monday to Saturday.

TAXI

For a taxi call ☎ 04 90 96 90 03.

THE CAMARGUE

Just half an hour from Arles, Provence's rolling and brightly coloured landscapes morph into the flat, bleached, desolate wilderness of the Camargue. The light is harsher, the wind is stronger, but, thankfully, its people have retained some southern warmth.

The area is particularly famous for its teeming birdlife. King of all is the pink flamingo, who likes to winter in the Camargue's expansive wetlands. But there are at least another 500 species of birds regularly visiting the area, so birdwatchers should pack their binoculars and camera – and plenty of mosquito repellent. Other nature-lovers will revel in horse-riding trips across the patchwork of pink and purple salt-pans, meadows with grazing bulls and rice fields.

Enclosed by the Petit Rhône and Grand Rhône Rivers, most of the Camargue wetlands are within the 850-sq-km Parc Naturel Régional de Camargue. The park was established in 1970 to preserve the area's fragile ecosystems while sustaining local agriculture. On the periphery, the Étang de Vaccarès and nearby peninsulas and islands form the

Réserve Nationale de Camargue, a 135-sq-km nature reserve.

The Camargue's two largest towns are the seaside pilgrim's outpost, Les Stes-Maries-de-la-Mer, and to the northwest, the walled town of Aigues Mortes.

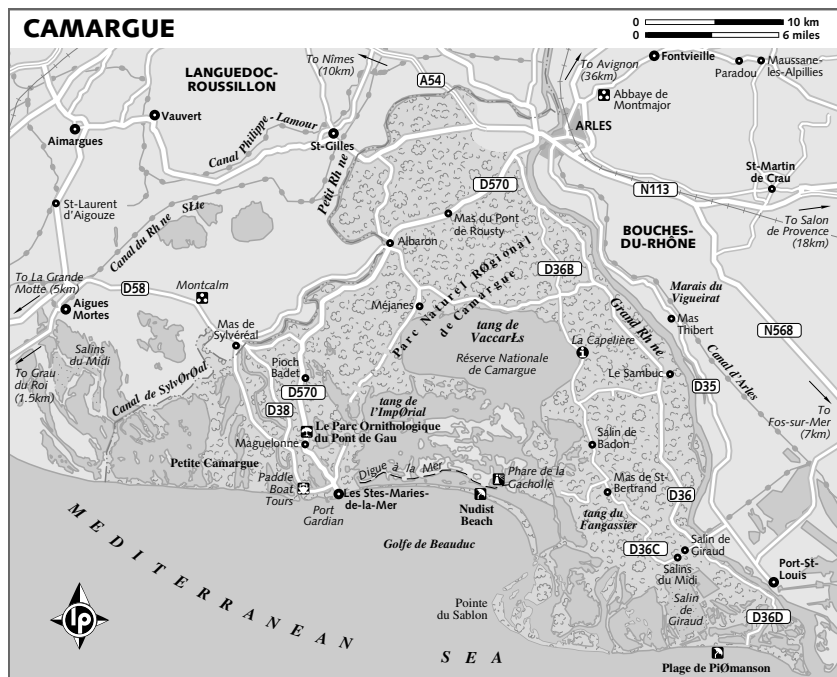
INFORMATION

Réserve Nationale de Camargue Office (☎ 04 90 97 00 97; La Capelière; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-6pm Apr-Sep, 9am-1pm & 2-5pm Wed-Mon Oct-Mar) Along the D36B, on the eastern side of Étang de Vaccarès, with exhibits on the Camargue's ecosystems, flora and fauna. Many trails and paths fan out from here.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Musée Camarguais

Inside an 1812-built sheep shed, the **Camargue Museum** (☎ 04 90 97 10 82; Mas du Pont de Rousty; adult/student €5/2.50; ☎ 9am-6pm Apr-Sep, 10am-5pm Wed-Mon Oct-Mar) is a fantastic introduction to this unique area. It covers the area's history and ecosystems, as well as traditional lifestyle in the new *gardian* (the Camargue version of cowboy!) room. From here, a 3.5km nature trail leads to an observation



tower with bird's-eye views. The museum is 10km southwest of Arles on the D570 to Les Stes-Maries-de-la-Mer.

Le Parc Ornithologique du Pont de Gau

Get up close and personal with some 2000 pink flamingos at the wonderful **Parc Ornithologique du Pont de Gau** (☎ 04 90 97 82 62; adult/child €7/4; 🕒 9am-sunset Apr-Sep, 10am-sunset Oct-Mar), a semi-wild natural reserve 4km north of Les Stes-Maries on the D570. There are dozens more bird species living on the reserve, which you can watch from 7km of beautiful trails meandering through the site.

Walking

Walking paths and trails wend through the Parc Naturel Régional and the Réserve Nationale, on the embankments and along the coast. Bookshops sell detailed walking maps, including the 1:25,000 IGN Série Bleue maps 2943ET and 2944OT. Tourist offices also have plenty of good free maps.

Boating & Watersports

Experience the waterlogged Camargue by a boat excursion departing from Port Gardian in the centre of Les Stes-Maries with **Camargue Bateau de Promenade** (☎ 04 90 97 84 72; 5 rue des Launes) or **Quatre Maries** (☎ 04 90 97 70 10; 36 av Théodore Aubanel). Or ply the delta's shallow waters on the beat-up old paddle boat **Le Tiki III** (☎ 04 90 97 81 68), docked at the mouth of the Petit Rhône 1.5km west of Les Stes-Maries. All charge around €10/5 per adult/child for a 1½-hour trip.

If you prefer to paddle under your own steam, **Kayak Vert Camargue** (☎ 04 66 73 57 17; www.kayakvert-camargue.fr; Mas de Sylvéréal; prices vary), 14km north of Les Stes-Maries off the D38, arranges canoeing and kayaking on the Petit Rhône.

Horse Riding

Saddle up for a *promenade à cheval* (horse ride) along the beach on the region's white horses. Farms along the D570 (Rte d'Arles) leading into Les Stes-Maries have signs advertising riding and lessons. Expect to pay €14 to €20 per hour, or €55 to €80 for half-day or day trips.

TOURS

Jeep safaris costing about €20 to €45 are offered by **Le Gitan** (☎ 04 66 70 09 65; 17 av de la

République) on Les Stes-Maries' seafront, and by L'Auberge Cavalière (opposite).

GETTING THERE & AWAY

For details about bus connections to/from Arles, see p832. There are also two buses a day in July and August from Les Stes-Maries to Montpellier (€10.60, two hours) via Aigues Mortes.

GETTING AROUND

Bicycles are perfect for traversing the Camargue's flat (if windy) terrain. East of Les Stes-Maries, areas along the seafront and further inland are reserved for walkers and cyclists.

For an English-language list of cycling routes go to **Le Vélo Saintois** (☎ 04 90 97 74 56; 19 rue de la République, Les Stes-Maries), which hires out mountain bikes for €15/34 per day/three days. **Le Vélociste** (☎ 04 90 97 83 26; place Mireille, Les Stes-Maries) also rents out bikes, and organises cycling and horse-riding (€36) or cycling and canoeing (€30) packages.

Les Stes-Maries-de-la-Mer

pop 2500

This small seaside town doesn't really feel like it belongs to Provence. Its windswept, flat surroundings and miles of uninterrupted sandy beach give it an Atlantic coast feel, while its gypsy culture and heritage suggest Spanish inklings rather than Gallic charms. This is particularly striking during the town's festivals when flamenco dancers, *ferias* and traditional costume-clad masses descend on the town. Outside of the high season, Les Saintes' deserted streets have a very eerie feel.

INFORMATION

The modern **tourist office** (☎ 04 90 97 82 55; www.saintesmaries.com; 5 av Van Gogh; 🕒 9am-8pm Jul & Aug, 9am-7pm Apr-Jun & Sep, 9am-6pm Mar & Oct, 9am-5pm Nov-Feb) has an excellent website and stacks of information on activities in the area, including maps and itineraries for walking and cycling.

SIGHTS

One of the best panoramas of the Camargue is rolled out from the **rooftop terrace** (Terrasse de l'Église; adult/child €2/1.30; 🕒 10am-8pm Jul & Aug, 10am-noon & 2-6pm Mar-Jun, Sep & Oct, 10am-noon & 2-5pm Sat & Sun, daily during school holidays Nov-Feb) of the **Église des Stes-Maries** (place de l'Église). In this church,

A WASHED-UP LEGEND?

Catholicism first reached European shores in what's now the little township of Les Stes-Maries. So the stories go, Stes Marie-Salomé and Marie-Jacobé fled the Holy Land in a tiny boat and were caught in a storm, drifting at sea until washing ashore here.

Provençal and Catholic lore diverge at this point: Catholicism believes Sara, patron saint of the *gitans* (Roma Gitano people, also known as gypsies), travelled with the two Marys on the boat; Provençal legend says Sara was already here and was the first person to recognise their holiness. In 1448 skeletal remains said to belong to Sara and the Marys were found in a crypt in Les Stes-Maries.

Finer historical points aside, it's by no means a washed-up legend. *Gitans* continue to make the pilgrimage here on 24 and 25 May (often staying for up to three weeks), dancing and playing music in the streets, and parading a statue of Sara through town. The Sunday in October closest to the 22nd sees a second pilgrimage dedicated to the two Stes Maries, and *courses Camarguaises* (nonlethal bullfights) are also held at this time.

dating from the 12th to the 15th century, the relics of St Sara – the highly revered patron saint of the Roma – were found in the crypt by King René in 1448. These are enshrined in a wooden chest, stashed in the stone wall above the choir.

Tickets for **bullfights** at Les Stes-Maries' Arènes are sold at the arena – check with the tourist office for schedules.

Les Stes-Maries is fringed by around 30km of uninterrupted fine-sand **beaches**. For an all-over tan, the area around **Phare de la Gacholle**, the lighthouse 11km east of town, is the place for bathing *sans* (without) suit.

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Les Stes-Maries spills over with colour and life during the ancient **gitan pilgrimages** (see boxed text, above).

SLEEPING & EATING

Low-rise 'ranch-style' hotels line the D570 heading into Les Stes-Maries. A number of old *mas* (tradition Provençal stone houses) also surround the town, and often let out rooms. Accommodation is more limited in winter.

Camping La Brise (☎ 04 90 97 84 67; fax 04 90 97 72 01; av Marcel Carrière; per site winter €12, summer €18.90-20.50; ☒ closed mid-Nov–mid-Dec; 🏠) Right on the beach, with not one but two swimming pools, this campsite is a good option for families. The site can be very windy, so pick somewhere sheltered.

Auberge de Jeunesse (☎ 04 90 97 51 72; www.auberge-de-jeunesse.fr, in French; Pioch Badet; dm incl breakfast, dinner & sheets €28.70; ☒ reception 7.30-10.30am & 5-11pm Sep-Jun, to midnight Jul & Aug) Half-board is part

of the package at this rural hostel, 8km north of Les Stes-Maries on the D570 to Arles. Buses from Arles' bus station drop you at the door.

Hôtel Méditerranée (☎ 04 90 97 82 09; www.mediterraneehotel.com, in French; 4 av Frédéric Mistral; d €40-55; 🏠) Handily located in the centre of town (so a good bet if you don't have your own wheels), this place is one of the cheapest and most charming options in Les Stes. Rooms have all been renovated and some have air-con. Breakfast is taken on a patio overrun with flowers.

Mas de la Grenouillère (☎ 04 90 97 90 22; fax 04 90 97 70 94; d/tr incl breakfast from €67/95; 🏠 🐎) Horses, fields and silence is what's waiting for you at the 'frog farm'. The owners are horse breeders and organise horse-riding trips. The *mas* is 1.5km down a dirt track signposted 1km north of Les Stes-Maries off the D570.

L'Auberge Cavalière (☎ 04 90 97 88 88; www.aubergecavaliere.com; D570; s €130-160, d €140-170, half-board available; 🏠 🐎 🏠) Approximately 1.5km north of Les Stes-Maries, this stunning yet salt-of-the-earth hotel spreads out over a typical Camargue landscape of wetlands and meadows. Rooms 340 to 345 look over a pond teeming with birdlife while the thatched *cabanes de gardian* (cabins) offer cosy independent quarters. The hotel runs horse-riding trips, including sunset and sunrise expeditions. The on-site restaurant (*menus* €28 to €38, open for lunch and dinner every day) serves great local fare, from bull-meat stews to Camargue rice.

Le Delta (☎ 04 90 97 81 12; 1 place Mireille; mains €11-15; ☒ lunch & dinner Tue-Sat, lunch Sun) A local favourite, Le Delta is a great place to try Camargue

specialities like *gardianne de taureau* (bull stew) and the area's thumbnail-sized clams called *tellines*.

Aigues-Mortes

pop 6800

Actually located over the border from Provence in the Gard *département* (administrative division of France), the town of Aigues-Mortes – meaning, somewhat eerily, ‘dead waters’ – is 28km northwest of Les Stes-Maries at the western extremity of the Camargue. Aigues-Mortes is set in flat marshland and encircled by walls. The town was established in the mid-13th century by Louis IX to give the French crown a Mediterranean port under its direct control, and in 1248 Louis IX's flotilla of 1500 ships massed here before setting sail to the Holy Land for the Seventh Crusade.

The cobbled streets inside the city walls are lined with restaurants, cafés and bars, giving it a festive atmosphere. It's definitely a charming option from which to explore the area.

INFORMATION

Tourist Office (☎ 04 66 53 73 00; www.ot-aigues-mortes.fr; place St-Louis; ☹ 9am-noon & 1-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-noon & 2-6pm Sat & Sun Sep-Jun, 9am-8pm Jul & Aug) Inside the walled city.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Scaling the ramparts rewards you with a sweeping overview of the town's history, and of surrounding marshes. Head to the top of the tower, **Tour de Constance** (☎ 04 66 53 61 55; adult/student/under 17yr €6.50/4.50/free; ☹ 10am-5.30pm Sep-Apr, 10am-7pm May-Aug). The 1.6km wall-top walk takes about one hour.

The southern ramparts afford views of the stretching salt-pans (the Salins du Midi), which you can travel through aboard the **salt train** (☎ 04 66 73 40 24; www.salins.fr; adult/child €8.20/6; ☹ Mar-Oct), accompanied by commentary in English. Book your tickets at the ticket office Porte de la Gardette, from where you will catch a bus to the salt-pan site.

SLEEPING & EATING

Parking within the town walls is practically impossible but there are plenty of car parks outside.

L'Escale (☎ 04 66 53 71 14; fax 04 66 53 76 74; http://hotel.escale.free.fr; 3 av Tour de Constance; d €26-48, 4-5-person r €55-65; ☹) It should be compulsory for every town to have somewhere like L'Escale, which caters

so well for budget travellers. The basic rooms are immaculate, as are the shared bathrooms and toilets of the cheaper rooms. Rooms in the annexe are bigger and good value for friends or families. The restaurant (mains €7 to €10), with red tablecloths and a flower-lined terrace, is one of the last bastions still churning out homemade *frites* to go with your steak.

L'Hermitage de St-Antoine (☎ 06 03 04 34 05; www.hermitagesa.com; 9 bd Intérieur Nord; d incl breakfast €74-79; ☹ ☹) Inside the walled town, this pocket-sized *chambre d'hôte* has three exquisitely appointed rooms, one with a small private terrace, another under the sloped ceiling, and all with fresh, crisp decor. The continental breakfast takes on new dimensions in the sun-filled patio. Note: L'Hermitage de St-Antoine only caters to children aged over 12.

Le Café de Bouzigues (☎ 04 66 53 93 95; 7 rue Pasteur; menu €29.50; ☹ lunch & dinner) This is an unexpected find in rather staid Camargue: Bouzigues is trendy, fun, unconventional – and loving it. Both the food and the interior have slightly wacky tendencies (hot and cold oysters with figs and an onion and ginger puree; duck leg with wheat, lard and hazelnut risotto), but either way it is a resounding success. The menu changes regularly, guaranteeing optimal novelty value.

THE VAUCLUSE

The Vaucluse is like every Provençal cliché rolled into one: lavender fields, scenic hills, rows upon rows of vineyards, enchanting villages and picturesque markets, traditional stone houses, beating summer sun and howling winter mistral. At the heart of Vaucluse – which means closed valley – is the exquisite town of Avignon, of historical nursery rhyme fame (see Pont St-Bénézet, opposite).

A car is the ideal way to cover the Vaucluse, but it's possible (if not expedient) to get from town to town by local bus.

AVIGNON

pop 90,800

Hooped by 4.3km of superbly preserved stone ramparts, this graceful city is the belle of Provence's ball. Its turn as the papal seat of power has bestowed Avignon with a treasury of magnificent art and architecture, none grander than the massive medieval fortress and papal palace, the Palais des Papes.

Famed for its annual performing arts festival, these days Avignon is also an animated student city and an ideal spot from which to step out into the surrounding region. In France and beyond, Avignon is perhaps best known for its fabled bridge, the Pont St-Bénézet, aka the Pont d'Avignon.

History

Avignon first gained its ramparts and its reputation as a city of art and culture during the 14th century, when Pope Clement V and his court fled political turmoil in Rome for Avignon. From 1309 to 1377, the seven French-born popes invested huge sums of money in building and decorating the papal palace. Under the popes' rule, Jews and political dissidents took shelter here. Pope Gregory XI left Avignon in 1376, but his death two years later led to the Great Schism (1378–1417), during which rival popes – up to three at one time – resided at Rome and Avignon, denouncing and excommunicating one another. Even after the schism was settled and an impartial pope – Martin V – established himself in Rome, Avignon remained under papal rule. The city and Comtat Venaissin (now the Vaucluse *département*) were ruled by papal legates until 1791, when they were annexed to France.

Orientation

The main avenue within the *intra-muros* (walled city) runs northwards from the train station to place de l'Horloge. South of the tourist office it's called cours Jean Jaurès, while north of the office it's rue de la République.

The café-clad central square place de l'Horloge is located 300m south of place du Palais, which abuts the Palais des Papes. The city gate nearest the train station is Porte de la République, while the city gate next to Pont Édouard Daladier, which leads to Villeneuve-lès-Avignon, is Porte de l'Oulle. The Quartier des Teinturiers (Dyers' Quarter), centred on rue des Teinturiers, southeast of place Pie, is the hang-out of Avignon's population of bohemian artists.

Information

BOOKSHOPS

Shakespeare (☎ 04 90 27 38 50; 155 rue de la Carreterie; ☎ 9.30am–noon & 2–6pm Tue–Sat) Enjoy homemade scones with your tomes at this English bookshop and *salon de thé*.

INTERNET ACCESS

Lots of internet cafés are around place Pie.
Chez W@M (☎ 04 90 86 19 03; 34 rue Bonneterie; per hr €3; ☎ 10am–8pm Mon–Thu & 10am–10pm Fri & Sat)

INTERNET RESOURCES

Provence Guide (www.provenceguide.com) Covers the Vaucluse region and includes B&Bs.

Visit Provence (www.visitprovence.com)

LAUNDRY

Lavmatic (9 rue du Chapeau Rouge; ☎ 7am–8.30pm) 21st-century laundrette with wi-fi.

MONEY

CIC (13 rue de la République) Has an ATM.

POST

Main Post Office (cours Président Kennedy) Offers currency exchange.

TOURIST INFORMATION

Tourist Office (☎ 04 32 74 32 74; www.avignon-tourisme.com; 41 cours Jean Jaurès; ☎ 9am–5pm Mon–Sat, 9.45am–5pm Sun Apr–Oct, 9am–7pm Mon–Sat, 9.45am–5pm Sun Jul, 9am–6pm Mon–Fri, 9am–5pm Sat & 10am–noon Sun Nov–Mar) Around 300m north of the train station.

Sights & Activities

Ticket offices for most sights close up to one hour before overall closing times. Admission to most sights is cheaper with the Avignon Passion pass (see the boxed text, p840).

PONT ST-BÉNEZET (PONT D'AVIGNON)

The fabled **Pont St-Bénézet** (St Bénézet's Bridge; ☎ 04 90 27 51 16; adult/student, 8–18yr/under 8yr €4.50/3.50/free; ☎ 9am–9pm Aug, 9am–8pm Jul & early–mid-Sep, 9am–7pm Apr–Jun & mid-Sep–Oct, 9.30am–5.45pm Nov–Mar), immortalised in the nursery rhyme *Sur le Pont d'Avignon*, was completed in 1185. It links Avignon with the settlement across the Rhône that later became Villeneuve-lès-Avignon. The 900m-long wooden structure was repaired and rebuilt several times before all but four of its 22 spans were washed away in the mid-1600s.

Entry is via cours Châtelet. If you don't feel like paying to visit the bridge, you can see it for free from the Rocher des Doms park, Pont Édouard Daladier or from across the river on the Île de la Barthelasse's chemin des Berges.

WALLED CITY

Wrapping around the city, Avignon's ramparts were built between 1359 and 1370.

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Chez W@.....	1 D3	Hôtel de l'Horloge.....	19 C2	Utopia Bar.....	38 D1
CIC.....	2 C2	Hôtel d'Europe.....	20 C2	ENTERTAINMENT ☒	
Lavmatic.....	3 D2	Hôtel du Palais des Papes.....	21 C2	Cinéma Utopia.....	(see 38)
Main Post Office.....	4 C4	Hôtel Mignon.....	22 C2	Fnac.....	39 C3
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Les Grands Bateaux de Provence.....	8 B2	La Fourchette.....	27 C2	Oliviers & Co.....	44 C2
Musée Angladon.....	9 C3	La Marmiton.....	28 C2	TRANSPORT	
Musée Calvet.....	10 C3	La Tropézienne.....	29 C2	Agence Commerciale TCRA.....	45 C4
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Pont St-Bénézet Entrance.....	14 C1	Restaurant Brunel.....	33 C1	La Barthelette Bus Stop.....	47 A1
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Auberge Bagatelle.....	(see 16)	Le Cid Café.....	(see 20)	Provence Bike.....	49 D4
Camping Bagatelle.....	16 B1	Mon Bar.....	35 D2	TGV Shuttle Bus Stop.....	(see 4)
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They were restored during the 19th century, minus their original moats – though even in the 14th century this defence system was hardly state-of-the-art, lacking machicolations (openings in the parapets for niceties such as pouring boiling oil on attackers, or for shooting out arrows).

Within the walls is a wealth of fine museums – the *Avignon Passion* booklet (see boxed text, p840) lists the whole gamut. The tourist office also has a French and English map with four suggested itineraries across the old town.

Palais des Papes

Flanked by the sprawling courtyard *cours d'Honneur*, the cavernous stone halls and extensive grounds of the **Palais des Papes** (Palace of the Popes; ☎ 04 90 27 50 00; place du Palais; adult/Avignon Passion pass, student & 12-18yr/under 12yr €6/3/free; ☹ 9am-9pm Aug, 9am-8pm Jul & early-mid-Sep, 9am-7pm Apr-Jun & mid-Sep-Oct, 9.30am-5.45pm Nov-Mar) testify to the fortune amassed by the papacy during the 'Babylonian Captivity'. Built during the 14th century and intended as a fortified palace for the pontifical court, it's the largest Gothic palace in Europe. Many of the 25 rooms are rather bare, save for the Pope's apartments and the odd stunning fresco or mosaic floor. To avoid the Babylonian cacophony of guides shouting their explanations to gaggles of organised tours, come at lunchtime when the groups have retreated to nearby restaurants.

The admission price includes a multilingual audio guide.

Musée du Petit Palais

During the 14th and 15th centuries, **Musée du Petit Palais** (☎ 04 90 86 44 58; place du Palais; adult/Avignon Passion pass €6/3; ☹ 10am-6pm Wed-Mon Jun-Sep, 10am-1pm & 2-6pm Wed-Mon Oct-May) served as a bishops' and archbishops' palace. These days it's home to an outstanding collection of lavishly coloured 13th- to 16th-century Italian religious paintings created by artists including Botticelli, Carpaccio and Giovanni di Paolo. English-language interpretive information is available.

Musée Calvet

Impressive architecture and art intertwine at the elegant Hôtel de Villeneuve-Martignan (built 1741-54), where you'll find **Musée Calvet** (☎ 04 90 86 33 84; 65 rue Joseph Vernet; adult/student & 12-18yr/under 12yr €6/3/free; ☹ 10am-6pm Wed-Mon Jun-Sep, 10am-1pm & 2-6pm Wed-Mon Oct-May) Among its collections are 15th-century wrought-iron works and paintings from the 16th to 20th centuries.

Musée Lapidaire

Small and fairly random, the **Musée Lapidaire** (☎ 04 90 86 33 84; 27 rue de la République; adult/Avignon Passion pass/under 12yr €2/1/free; ☹ 10am-6pm Wed-Mon Jun-Sep, 10am-1pm & 2-6pm Wed-Mon Oct-May) houses a collection of Egyptian, Roman, Etruscan and early Christian pieces.

Musée Angladon

Born out of the private collection of couturier Jacques Doucet (1853-1929) and visionary

AVIGNON PASSION

Anyone passionate about Avignon's rich cultural heritage will want to pick up a free Avignon Passion pass from the tourist office. This nifty pass entitles you to 20% to 50% discounted entry on second and subsequent visits to museums and monuments (the equivalent of student prices), as well as reduced prices on the tourist office walking tours. It's valid for 15 days in all the museums of Avignon, as well as Villeneuve-lès-Avignon, and covers a family of five.

thinking of his heirs Jean and Paulette Angladon-Dubrujeaud, the charming **Musée Angladon** (☎ 04 90 82 29 03; www.angladon.com; 5 rue Laboureur; adult/students, 7-18yr/under 7yr €6/4/free; ♿ 1-6pm Tue-Sun mid-Mar-mid-Nov, 1-6pm Wed-Sun mid-Nov-mid-Mar) harbours Impressionist treasures. These include the only Van Gogh painting in Provence (*Railway Wagons*), as well as works by Cézanne, Manet, Degas and other illustrious artists such as Picasso, Modigliani and Fujita. Upstairs is a collection of antique furniture and 16th and 17th-century paintings, many of which belonged to the Dubrujeauds, who were artists themselves.

BOATING

Les Grands Bateaux de Provence (☎ 04 90 85 62 25; www.mireio.net, in French; allées de l'Ouille) runs year-round excursions down the Rhône to Arles or the vineyard area of Châteauneuf-du-Pape on two restaurant boats (adult/Avignon Passion pass €46.50/41.85, including a meal). Less-ambitious destinations include Villeneuve-lès-Avignon and Île de la Barthelasse from two to five times daily from April to September.

A free **shuttle boat** (♿) 10am-12.30pm & 2-6.30pm Apr-Jun & Sep, 11am-9pm Jul & Aug, 2-5.30pm Wed, 10am-noon & 2-5.30pm Sat & Sun Oct-Dec & mid-Feb-Mar) adjacent to Pont St-Bénézet connects the walled city with the Île de la Barthelasse.

Tours

Two-hour **guided tours** (adult/Avignon Passion pass, student, 8-18yr/under 8yr €11/8/free) of Avignon in English and French depart daily from the tourist office at 10am between April and October (Saturday only between November and March).

Autocars Lieutaud (☎ 04 90 86 36 75; www.cars-lieutaud.fr) runs half- and full-day bus tours throughout the year to nearby vineyards,

the Pont du Gars or the Luberon (full price/Avignon Passion pass €45/40). For a more-authentic (and slower!) experience, do it in the archetypal French car: a Citroën 2CV (€145 for a three-hour chauffeured trip in the Alpilles).

Festivals & Events

Festival d'Avignon (www.festival-avignon.com)

Hundreds of artists take to the stage and streets during this world-famous festival, founded in 1946 and held every year from early July to early August. Tickets for official festival performances in the Palais des Papes' cours d'Honneur cost around €25; reservations can be made from mid-June. Information can be obtained from the **Bureau du Festival** (☎ 04 90 27 66 50; Espace St-Louis, 20 rue du Portail Boquier).

Festival Off (☎ 04 90 85 13 08; www.avignonleoff.com, in French) Paralleling the official Avignon festival, this fringe event has an eclectic, cheaper program of experimental performances. A Carte Public Adhérent (€14) gives you a 30% discount on all Festival Off performances (each costing about €15 before the discount).

Sleeping

Avignon is one of the few places in Provence that caters well for budget-conscious travellers. You'll need to book many months ahead for a room during the festival, when prices soar.

BUDGET

Camping Bagatelle (☎ 0490 86 30 39; camping.bagatelle@wanadoo.fr; Île de la Barthelasse; tent only per person €4.66-6.16, per 2 people with car €11.32-19.32; ♿ reception 8am-9pm) Multilingual, shaded and only 20 minutes' walk from the centre on Île de la Barthelasse, this campsite offers great discounts to campers who come without a car.

Auberge Bagatelle (☎ 04 90 85 78 45; auberge.bagatelle@wanadoo.fr; Île de la Barthelasse; dm €15.90, s €35, d €40) Adjoining the campsite, the two- to eight-bed dorms are basic but serviceable. All rates include breakfast; sheets are €2.50. There are plenty of parties going on in the next-door bar-restaurant. Take bus 10 from the main post office to La Barthelasse stop, then follow the river to the campsite.

Hôtel Splendid (☎ 04 90 86 14 46; www.avignon-splendid-hotel.com; 17 rue Agricole Perdiguer; s €32-46, d €48-70, apt €70-90) This cyclist-friendly place has charming rooms, half of them overlooking the pretty neighbouring park, all with brand new bathrooms. The hotel also has three studio-flats equipped with kitchenette, ideal for longer stays in the heart of Provence; the

ground-floor flat even has its own patio. The owners are also environmentally minded and use only natural cleaning products.

Hôtel Mignon (☎ 04 90 82 17 30; www.hotel-mignon.com; 12 rue Joseph Vernet; s €42-62, d €59-72; ♿ 📺) Cute and comfy, this 16-room place within the walled city is a favourite for its small rooms in pretty shades (and small bathrooms – you'll see what we mean), its friendly, helpful staff, wi-fi, and a decent breakfast of croissants and rolls (€5).

YMCA-UCG (☎ 04 90 25 46 20; www.ymca-avignon.com; 7bis chemin de la Justice; with/without bathroom d €45/30, tr €54/36, q €54/48; 📺) reception 8.30am-6pm, closed Dec-early Jan; ♿) If you're after your own space on a shoestring budget, head to this spotless hostel across the river, just outside Villeneuve-lès-Avignon. There's a massive swimming pool and matching terrace with panoramic views of the city. Sheets are included, breakfast costs €5, and wheelchair access is good. Take bus 10 to the Monteau stop or take the 30-minute stroll across the bridge.

Hôtel Boquier (☎ 04 90 82 34 43; www.hotel-boquier.com, in French; 6 rue du Portail Boquier; d €45-66; ♿) A wind of change is blowing through Hôtel Boquier: Sylvie and Pascal Sendra, the new owners, have been bowled over by their new city, and their infectious enthusiasm has swept through this central little place. It's bright, airy and spacious, and the themed rooms are particularly attractive (try for Morocco or Lavender).

MIDRANGE

Hôtel du Palais des Papes (☎ 04 90 86 04 13; www.hotel-avignon.com; 3 place du Palais des Papes; d €65-98) Strategically located at the crossroads between the Palais des Papes and the Place de l'Horloge, street-side rooms offer stunning views of both locations, while rooms overlooking the courtyard are whisper-quiet. Inside, the hotel has kept many of its original medieval features, the grandest being in the breakfast room and the excellent cave-like restaurant Le Lutrin (mains €24 to €28, open for lunch and dinner daily).

Hôtel de Garlande (☎ 04 90 80 08 85; www.hotelgarlande.com; 20 rue Galante; d €75-115; ♿ 📺) Central for just about everything, Hôtel de Garlande is a sweet, familial little 12-room place housed in a historic *hôtel particulier* overlooking a narrow street. Rooms are elegantly decorated, with red clearly being the owner's colour of predilection. In the low season, ring ahead to check that there will be someone at reception when you arrive.

Hôtel de l'Horloge (☎ 04 90 16 42 00; www.hotels-ocre-azur.com; place de l'Horloge; d €85-170; ♿) Most of rooms at this super central hotel, just off Avignon's main square, are pretty standard (comfortable, all mod cons – what you'd expect of a three-star place), but the five terrace rooms really have the edge with their sophisticated furnishings, linens and *vantage point*. The room to ask for is 505 with its incredible view of the Palais des Papes. Good wheelchair access.

our pick Le Limas (☎ 04 90 14 67 19; www.le-limas-avignon.com; 51 rue du Limas; d incl breakfast €100-160, tr incl breakfast €150-180; ♿ 📺) Behind its discreet (easily missed) lavender door, this chic B&B in an 18th-century town house is like something out of *Vogue Living*. It is everything interior designers like to achieve when mixing old and new, from the state-of-the-art kitchen and minimalist white decor to antique fireplaces and 18th-century spiral staircase. Breakfast by the dining room's fireplace or on the sun-drenched terrace is a treat, as is the presence of the bubbly Marion.

TOP END

Hôtel d'Europe (☎ 04 90 14 76 76; www.heurope.com; 12 place Grillon; d €169-475; ♿ 📺) You're in good company at this antique-laden hotel, established in 1799: guests have included illustrious leaders and dignitaries from Napoleon to Jacques Chirac, Charles Dickens, Jacqueline Kennedy-Onassis and Salvador Dali. The 44 rooms are befittingly sumptuous, subtly blending mod cons such as wi-fi and air-con with period tapestries and marble bathrooms.

Eating

Place de l'Horloge is a riot of cafés. They're popular with tourists, but the food is nothing to write home about. Restaurants are open seven days a week during the festival.

Numéro 75 (☎ 04 90 27 16 00; 75 rue Guillaume Puy; mains from €10; 📺) lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) Whether in the lush garden or inside the stunning dining room of absinthe inventor Jules Pernod's former *hôtel particulier*, the food at Numéro 75 is everything you'd want Mediterranean cuisine to be: super-fresh, packed with flavours, and ever so cheap.

Au Tout Petit (☎ 04 90 82 38 86; 4 rue d'Amphoux; lunch menu €10, dinner menu €18-24; 📺) lunch & dinner Mon-Sat, closed Wed night) If you're a foodie, the menu of 'The Teeny Tiny' is going to be music to your ears: so much imagination packed in such a small place! Asparagus ravioli and

tandoori sauce, salmon lasagne and cardamom snails, apricot *tarte Tatin* with rosemary-and-madeleine ice cream – doesn't that just sound like food poetry to you?

Restaurant Brunel (☎ 04 90 85 24 83; 46 rue de la Balance; mains €11-16, menus €27.50-32.50; ☎ lunch & dinner Tue-Sat) The elegant mirror-lined, muted red and grey dining room reflects the modern touch this restaurant adds to its Provençal fare. Lunchtime deals are a steal, as are the few outdoor tables in sunny weather. No wonder the locals like it here.

La Fourchette (☎ 04 90 85 20 93; 17 rue Racine; menus from €25; ☎ lunch & dinner Mon-Fri) This perennial Avignon establishment does so well during the week that it can afford to close on weekends. Lucky them, and poor you, because on weekends you'll be missing out on great, unpretentious French cuisine (lamb, sardines, duck, and tasty desserts such as the melt-in-your-mouth ice cream meringue with praline) in a decor cluttered with old tools and frames.

Christian Etienne (☎ 04 90 86 16 50; 10 rue de Mons; mains €28-45; ☎ lunch & dinner Tue-Sat Aug-Jun, lunch & dinner Jul) This is Avignon's top table. The restaurant's elevated dining room and leafy outdoor terrace are found in a 12th-century palace near the Palais des Papes. The refined Provençal cuisine (including an amazing and highly unusual starter-to-dessert tomato menu) is prepared by its eponymous master chef.

Le Marmiton (☎ 04 90 14 20 20; www.la-mirande.fr; 4 place de l'Amirande; lunch/dinner menus €38/49, table d'hôte €92; ☎ restaurant lunch & dinner Thu-Mon, table d'hôte dinner Tue-Sat) Dine in one of France's famous gastronomic restaurants, or watch the preparation of classic Provençal food and then dine on the four-course feast – the meal that is created in front of you is cooked in the intimate kitchen of this 14th-century cardinals'-palace-turned-hotel (the exclusive Hôtel de la Mirande). Even better, try your hand in the exquisite 19th-century kitchen – Le Marmiton puts on a roll-call of visiting chefs who run phenomenal cooking courses year-round, from traditional half-day, three-course meal preparation (€110 to €135) to shorter dedicated chocolate or pastry courses (€80), or a decadent truffle weekend (€645, including accommodation).

SELF-CATERING

Over 40 outlets fill **Les Halles' food market** (place Pie; ☎ 7am-1pm Tue-Sun), or pick up groceries at **Monoprix** (24 rue de la République; ☎ 8am-9pm Mon-Sat) and St-Tropez's famous cream-and-cake con-

coction, *tarte tropézienne*, and other Avignon treats at **La Tropézienne** (☎ 04 90 86 24 72; 22 rue St-Agricol; ☎ 8.30am-7.30pm Mon-Sat). Then make your way to Avignon's most picturesque picnic spot, **Rocher des Doms**, a bluff-top park with views spanning the Rhône, Pont St-Bénézet, Villeneuve-lès-Avignon and Mont Ventoux. Finish off with a *papaline d'Avignon* – a pink, chocolate ball filled with a potent Mont Ventoux herbal liqueur that packs a punch; available from speciality shops around town.

Drinking

Mon Bar (17 rue Portail-Matheron; ☎ 8am-8pm) This Parisian-looking bistro has been going for 70 years and looks set to go for another 70. It's an institution in the neighbourhood, so don't expect more than a scowl if you try to order your coffee in English. You have been warned.

La Compagnie des Comptoirs (☎ 04 90 85 99 04; 83 rue Joseph Vernet; lunch menu €9, mains €25-29; ☎ noon-1am) Wrapped around a renovated cloister, La Compagnie has reached new heights in aesthetics: dine under the white-on-white arched alleyways, sip a cocktail by the palm-lined courtyard basin or simply nibble fusion snacks at the bar counter in the ground-floor rooms where DJs mix it up on weekends. The food still has some way to go to match the surroundings but it's definitely on the right track.

Tapalocas (☎ 04 90 82 56 84; 15 rue Galante; dishes from €3; ☎ noon-1am) In the pedestrian area, tuck into a seemingly endless array of traditional Spanish tapas over a sangria or two.

Utopia Bar (☎ 04 90 27 04 96; 4 rue des escaliers Ste-Anne; ☎ noon-midnight) At the foot of the imposing Palais des Papes walls, l'Utopia has something of a thespian bent with its red velvet benches, beautiful glass verandah and great mirrors throughout. It's the perfect place for a chilled glass of white; the *tartines* will fend off the hunger until you summon up the willpower to go elsewhere for a proper dinner.

Le Cid Café (☎ 04 90 82 30 28; 11 place de l'Horloge; ☎ 11am-late) DJs keep the beats coming at this fluoro-lit, all happening bar on Place de l'Horloge. Locals love it and so do visitors keen for a piece of the action.

Red Sky (☎ 04 90 85 93 23; rue St-Jean le Vieux; ☎ 10am-1am) Looking as though someone picked it up in central London and plonked it in Avignon, this cherry-red English pub has gigs, theme nights and plenty of live sport on TV.

Entertainment

The free *César* weekly magazine and the tourist office's fortnightly newsletter, *Rendez-vous d'Avignon* (both in French), carry events listings. Tickets for most events are sold at **Fnac** (☎ 08 25 02 00 20; 19 rue de la République; ☎ 10am-7pm Mon-Sat); the tourist office also sells tickets for many cultural fixtures.

Opéra d'Avignon (☎ 04 90 82 81 40; place de l'Horloge; ☎ box office 11am-6pm Tue-Sat) Housed in an imposing structure built in 1847, Opéra d'Avignon stages everything from operas to ballets.

Cinéma Utopia (☎ 04 90 82 65 36; 4 rue des escaliers Ste-Anne; adult/concession €5.50/3.50) In the cultural centre tucked behind the Palais des Papes, this cinema screens subtitled films.

NIGHTCLUBS

Red Zone (☎ 04 90 27 02 44; 25 rue Carnot; ☎ 9pm-3am) A studenty crowd gathers here for its regular gigs, boozing and always-buzzing bar.

L'Esclave (☎ 04 90 85 14 91; www.esclavebar.com, in French; 12 rue du Limas; ☎ hr vary) Avignon's inner-city gay hotspot has something on every night of the week. Check its website for tastings and details.

Shopping

Comtesse du Barry (☎ 04 90 82 62 92; 25 rue St-Agricol) Stock up on gourmet goodies like fine wine and foie gras.

Oliviers & Co (☎ 04 90 86 18 41; 19 rue St-Agricol) Fine olive oil and olive oil-based products such as soap, hand cream and biscuits.

Getting There & Away

AIR

The **Aéroport Avignon-Caumont** (☎ 04 90 81 51 51; www.avignon.aeroport.fr) is 8km southeast of Avignon. There are flights from Britain and Ireland from April to October.

BUS

The **bus station** (☎ 04 90 82 07 35; bd St-Roch; ☎ information window 8am-7pm Mon-Fri, 8am-1pm Sat) is in the basement of the building that's down the ramp to the right as you exit the train station. Tickets are sold on the buses.

Bus services include Aix-en-Provence (€14, one hour), Arles (€7.10, 1½ hours), Carpentras (€4.40, 35 minutes), Marseille (€18.50, two hours), Nîmes (€8.10, 1¼ hours) and Orange (€5.90, 45 minutes). Most lines operate on Sunday, with reduced frequency.

Long-haul bus companies **Linebús** (☎ 04 90 85 30 48) and **Eurolines** (☎ 04 90 85 27 60; www.eurolines.com) have offices at the far end of the bus platforms.

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

Most car-rental agencies are either inside the main train station complex or nearby (and they're well signed).

To reduce traffic within the walls, the city has over 900 free, monitored parking spaces at Parking de L'Île Piot, which is served by a free shuttle bus.

TRAIN

Avignon has two train stations: Gare Avignon TGV, which is 4km southwest in the suburb of Courtine, and central **Gare Avignon Centre** (42 bd St-Roch), where local trains to/from Orange (€5.20, 20 minutes), Arles (€6.30, 20 minutes) and Nîmes (€8.10, 30 minutes) arrive and depart.

Some TGVs to/from Paris stop at Gare Avignon Centre, but TGV services such as to/from Marseille (€23.10, 35 minutes) and Nice (€51.80, three hours) only use Gare Avignon TGV.

In July and August there's a direct **Eurostar** (www.eurostar.com) service on Saturdays from London (from €125 return, six hours) to Gare Avignon Centre. See p965 for more details.

There is a **left luggage** (per bag from €4; ☎ 7am-7pm winter, 7am-10pm summer) facility inside the station.

Getting Around

TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

There is no public transport to the airport. A taxi will cost around €20.

BICYCLE

Bike-hire places in town include **Provence Bike** (☎ 04 90 27 92 61; www.provence-bike.com, in French; 52 bd St-Roch), which also rents out scooters and motorbikes.

BUS

Local **TCRA** (Transports en Commun de la Région d'Avignon; www.tcra.fr, in French) bus tickets cost €1.10 each, purchased on board. Buses run from 7am to about 7.40pm (less frequently on Sunday, from 8am to 6pm). The two most important bus transfer points are the Poste stop at the main post office and place Pie.

Carnets of 10 tickets (€9.40) and free *plan du réseau* (bus maps) are available at the

Agence Commerciale TCRA (☎ 04 32 74 18 32; av de Lattre de Tassigny; ☎ 8.30am-12.30pm & 1.30-6pm Mon-Fri).

Villeneuve-lès-Avignon is linked with Avignon by bus 11, which stops in front of the main post office and on the western side of the walled city near Porte de l'Oulle.

Navette (shuttle) buses link Gare Avignon TGV with the centre (€1.10, 10 to 13 minutes, half-hourly between 6.15am and 11.30pm); buses use the bus stop in front of the post office on cours Président Kennedy.

TAXI

Pick up a taxi outside the train station or call ☎ 04 90 82 20 20 around the clock.

AROUND AVIGNON

Villeneuve-lès-Avignon

pop 12,098

Across the Rhône from Avignon, the 13th-century Villeneuve-lès-Avignon (sometimes written as Villeneuve-lez-Avignon, and almost always just called Villeneuve, meaning 'new city') became known as the City of Cardinals as many archbishops affiliated with the papal court built large residences in the town, despite the fact that it was situated in territory ruled by the French crown, which in turn established a garrison here to keep an eye on events in the papal-controlled city across the river.

Just 3km from Avignon, Villeneuve is easily reached by foot (around 30 minutes) or bus 11 from Avignon's main post office. Sites are included in the *Avignon Passion* pass (see boxed text, p840).

Chartreuse du Val de Bénédiction (☎ 04 90 15 24 24; 58 rue de la République; full price/Avignon Passion pass €6.50/5.30; ☎ 9.30am-6pm Apr-Sep, 9.30am-5pm Mon-Fri, 10am-5pm Sat & Sun Oct-Mar) was once the largest and most important Carthusian monastery in France, and it still looks it today. The reconstructed cells give a good idea of what the austere life of the monks was like.

If you're remotely interested in religious art, check out Enguerrand Quarton's lavish and dramatic 1453 painting *The Crowning of the Virgin* and the rare 14th-century *Ivory Virgin* at **Musée Pierre de Luxembourg** (☎ 04 90 27 49 66; 3 rue de la République; full price/Avignon Passion pass €3/2; ☎ 10am-12.30pm & 2-6.30pm Tue-Sun Apr-Sep, 10am-noon & 2-5pm Tue-Sun Oct-Jan & Mar). Ask for the accompanying notes for an insight into its commissioning and its underpinning religious dogma.

If you're up for it, take the spiral steps to the top of **Tour Philippe-le-Bel** (☎ 04 32 70 08 57; adult/

Avignon Passion pass €2/1.50; ☎ 10am-12.30pm & 2-6.30pm Tue-Sun Apr-Sep, 10am-noon & 2-5pm Tue-Sun Oct, Nov & Mar). This 14th-century defensive tower, built at what was the northwestern end of Pont St-Bénézet, has awesome views of the walled city.

Provençal panoramas are also plentiful from the majestic 14th-century **Fort St-André** (☎ 04 90 25 45 35; adult/Avignon Passion pass €5/4.20; ☎ 10am-1pm & 2-6pm mid-May-mid-Sep, to 5.30pm Apr-mid-May & mid-end Sep, to 5pm Oct-Mar).

Les Baux-de-Provence

pop 457

At the heart of the Alpilles and spectacularly perched above picture-perfect rolling hills of vineyards, olive groves and orchards is the intricate Provençal village of Les Baux-de-Provence, 30km south of Avignon towards Arles. Les Baux was vividly immortalised on canvas by Van Gogh during his time in nearby St-Rémy de Provence (see boxed text, p830).

Clawing precariously onto a 245m-high grey limestone *baou* (Provençal for rocky spur) is the rambling **Château des Baux** (☎ 04 90 54 55 56; adult/child €7.60/5.70; ☎ 9am-8.30pm summer, 9.30am-6pm autumn, 9.30am-5pm winter, 9am-6.30pm spring) at the top of the village. Thought to date back to the 10th century, it was largely destroyed during the reign of Louis XIII in 1633. Its remains are pitched on the edge of a sheer cliff, offering breathtaking panoramas of the valley below. Audioguides in several languages detail the history of the castle, village and region, and demonstrations of medieval warfare frequently feature in summer.

Les Baux-de-Provence is one of the most visited villages in France – aim for early evening after the caterpillar of tourist coaches has crawled back downhill. The **tourist office** (☎ 04 90 54 34 39; www.lesbauxdeprovence.com; ☎ 9.30am-1pm & 2-5.30pm Mon-Fri, 10am-noon & 2-5pm Sat & Sun) can give visitors information on Les Baux' handful of accommodation options. Parking within 800m of the village costs a flat €3 to €5 but you can park for free at **Cathédrale d'Images** (www.cathedrale-images.com; adult/child €7.50/3.50), which screens large-scale sound-and-light projections that flicker against the backdrop of a former quarry cave, just a few minutes' stroll north of the village.

ORANGE

pop 29,000

Considering how exceptional Orange's Roman theatre is (if you're only going to see one Roman site in France, make sure it's this

one), the town itself is surprisingly untouristy, and really dead in the winter. It does mean accommodation is good value compared with that of neighbouring towns, but you'll struggle to find an open restaurant on a Sunday or Monday night.

The House of Orange – the princely dynasty that had ruled Orange since the 12th century – made its mark on the history of the Netherlands through a 16th-century marriage with the German House of Nassau. It later made its mark on English history through William III (William of Orange). Known as Arenja in Provençal, it had earlier been a stronghold of the Reformation, and was ceded to France in 1713 by the Treaty of Utrecht. To this day, many members of the royal house of the Netherlands are known as the princes and princesses of Orange-Nassau.

Orientation

Orange's train station is about 1.5km east of the city centre's place de la République, along av Frédéric Mistral, then rue de la République. Rue St-Martin links place de la République and nearby place Clemenceau with the tourist office, which is 250m to the west. Théâtre Antique is two blocks south of place de la République. The tiny River Meyne lies north of the centre. From the train station, bus 1 from the École Mistral school goes to the centre of town; get off at Pourtoules for the Théâtre Antique.

Information

Crédit Lyonnais (7 place de la République)

La Bugado (5 av Général Leclerc; ☎ 7am-9pm)
Laundrette.

Post Office (679 bd Édouard Daladier) The only place in Orange that changes money.

Tourist Office (☎ 04 90 34 70 88; www.otorange.fr; 5 cours Aristide Briand; ☎ 9am-7.30pm Mon-Sat & 10am-1pm & 2-7pm Sun Jul & Aug, 9am-6.30pm Mon-Sat & 2-6.30pm Apr-Jun & Sep, 10am-1pm & 2-5pm Mon-Sat Oct-Mar)

Sights

THÉÂTRE ANTIQUE

Orange's **Roman theatre** (☎ 04 90 51 17 60; adult/student €7.70/5.90; ☎ 9am-7pm Jun-Aug, 9am-6pm Apr, May & Sep, 9.30am-5.30pm Mar & Oct, 9.30am-4.30pm Nov-Feb) is by far the most impressive Roman sight in France. Its sheer size and age are awe-inspiring; designed to seat 10,000 spectators, it's thought to have been built during

Augustus Caesar's rule (27 BC–AD 14). The 103m-wide, 37m-high stage wall is one of only three in the world still standing in its entirety – the other two are in Syria and Turkey – minus a few mosaics and the roof (its replacement is a modern addition). Admission includes a seven-language audioguide.

The theatre still regularly stages theatrical and musical performances (see below). Do catch a performance, if you can; balmy summer nights in this millennia-old venue are truly magical.

The admission price for the theatre is also good for entry to the **museum** (museum only adult/child €4.50/3.50; ☎ opens/closes 15min after/before the theatre) across the road, which has some unassuming treasures of its own. These include segments of the Roman survey registers (a precursor to the tax department) and the friezes that formed part of the theatre's scenery.

Follow montée Philbert de Chalons or montée Lambert to the top of **Colline St-Eutrope** (St Eutrope Hill; elevation 97m) for a bird's-eye view of the theatre, and for phenomenal views of the Mont Ventoux and the Dentelles de Montmirail. En route you pass the ruins of a 12th-century **château**, the former residence of the princes of Orange.

ARC DE TRIOMPHE

Orange's 1st-century AD **triumphal arch** stands a proud 19m high and wide, and 8m thick, at the northern end of plane tree-lined av de l'Arc de Triomphe, about 450m northwest of the town centre. On its facade, ornate sculptures commemorate the Romans' victories over the Gauls in 49 BC.

Festivals & Events

In July and August Théâtre Antique comes alive with all-night concerts during **Les Chorégies d'Orange** (www.choregies.asso.fr), a series of weekend operas, classical concerts and choral performances. Festival tickets (€14 to €220, with good concession rates) must be reserved months beforehand. A week-long **jazz festival** swings into town in the last week of June.

Sleeping

Camping Le Jonquier (☎ 04 90 34 49 48; www.campinglejonquier.com, in French; 1321 rue Alexis Carrel; camping per 2 people €18.50-24; ☎ Easter-Sep; ♿) Perfect for activity junkies, at Le Jonquier you can splash in the pool, play minigolf, tennis or table tennis, or chill in the spa after a session at the

gym. From the Arc de Triomphe walk 100m north, turn left onto rue du Bourbonnais and right again at the second roundabout onto rue Alexis Carrel. The campsite is 300m on your left.

Hôtel l'Herbier d'Orange (☎ 04 90 34 09 23; www.lherbierorange.com, in French; 8 place aux Herbes; s €32-37, d €37-50, tr €50-55; ☎ reception 8am-noon & 3-5pm winter, 7am-11pm summer) The old adage of 'you get what you pay for' holds true at this 20-room hotel: cleanliness is patchy, some rooms reek of cigarettes, and noise insulation is minimal. It's a shame because the place has plenty going for it: nice building, bright rooms, tip-top location, wi-fi, private parking and helpful staff.

Hôtel St-Florent (☎ 04 90 34 18 53; www.hotelsaintflorent.com; 4 rue du Mazeau; d €35-77; 🏠) A skip and a hop from the Théâtre Antique, the St-Florent has 17 colourful, chintzy rooms with antique wooden beds and bathrooms in dire need of gutting, plus a breakfast room filled with a riot of fake flowers, iridescent orange tablecloths and Christmas lights. Private parking is €6 and wi-fi is free.

Le Glacier (☎ 04 90 34 02 01; www.le-glacier.com; 46 cours Aristide Briand; d €49-100; 🏠) Probably the best option in town, with individually decorated cosy, bright rooms, tip-top bathrooms and charming owners. The hotel also rents out bikes (per half-/full day €12/16), has wi-fi and is equidistant from the theatre, tourist office and town centre.

Hôtel Arène (☎ 04 90 11 40 40; www.bestwestern.fr; place de Langes; d €65-120; 🏠 📺 📺) With a whole floor dedicated to hypoallergenic, ecological rooms, the Italian-run Arène has managed to retain some individuality despite being integrated into a chain. The 'Italian' rooms, with their portrait-decorated doors, have stupendous bathrooms – some with panoramic bath tubs. The 'Provençal' rooms are a tad more subdued, but very cushy all the same. Wheelchair access is good and there is free wi-fi.

Eating

Le Forum (☎ 04 90 34 01 09; 3 rue Mazeau; mains €15; ☎ lunch & dinner Tue-Fri & Sun, dinner Sat) You can either pick and choose on the *carte* or go for the whole hog with the restaurant's themed menus (duck, scallops or foie gras). Locals love both and regularly come back; just follow their lead.

Le Parvis (☎ 04 90 34 82 00; 55 cours Pourtoles; 2-course menu €20.50-22.50; ☎ lunch & dinner Tue-Sat, lunch Sun) The only noise you'll hear at Orange's

gastronomic restaurant is the clinking of cutlery against plates and the hushed tones of its gourmet guests. It's all a little formal but the food is good (marinated lamb, grilled trout, and herbs and spices throughout the menu) – and very good-value, at that.

Classic fare starts at the terrace-only **Festival Café** (☎ 04 90 34 65 58; 5 place de la République; mains around €10; ☎ lunch & dinner), which sets up a marquee in inclement weather, and its indoor neighbour **Brasserie Le Palace** (☎ 04 90 34 13 51; 7 rue de la République; mains €9; ☎ 8am-7.30pm Mon-Sat summer, shorter hr winter), where you can squeeze into the red vinyl booths for a coffee or a *plat du jour* (daily special).

The town's central streets are lined with stalls each Thursday for its weekly market (if you need to move your car before the market wraps up, park at the edges of the city). Self-caterers can also pick up supplies at **Petit Casino** (35 rue St-Martin).

Getting There & Away

BUS

There's no longer a bus station, so buses stop on bd Édouard Daladier instead, southwest of the post office. Destinations include Avignon (€5.90, 40 minutes), Vaison-la-Romaine (€5.10, 45 minutes) and Carpentras (€4.80, 45 minutes)

TRAIN

Orange's **train station** (☎ 04 90 11 88 03; av Frédéric Mistral) has services south to Avignon (€5.20, 15 minutes), Marseille (€20.30, 1½ hours) and beyond, and north including Lyon (€25.60, two hours).

VAISON-LA-ROMAINE

pop 7060

Nestled in a valley at the crossroads of seven hills, Vaison-la-Romaine has long been a traditional exchange place. The tradition endures at the thriving Tuesday market, while the town's rich Roman legacy – the largest archaeological site in France – reveals its ancient roots.

Nowadays Vaison is a quintessential Provençal village, split by the temperamental waters of River l'Ouvèze into a delightful pedestrianised centre, with dappled plane trees, and the walled, cobbled street Cité Médiévale (Medieval City) on the hilltop. Nearby Mont Ventoux provides endless outdoor excursions for those tired of old stones.

Orientation

The ever-flooding River l'Ouvèze bisects Vaison. The modern centre is on the river's north bank; the Cité Médiévale is on its south side.

Pedestrianised Grand-rue heads north-west from the Pont Romain, changing its name near the Roman ruins to become av du Général de Gaulle.

To get from the bus station to the tourist office, turn left as you leave the station and then left again into rue Colonel Parazols, which leads past the Fouilles de Puymin excavations along rue Burrhus.

Information

Vaison's **tourist office** (☎ 04 90 36 02 11; www.vaison-la-romaine.com; place du Chanoine Sautel; ☎ 9am-12.30pm & 2-6.45pm Jul & Aug, 9am-noon & 2-5.45pm Mon-Sat, 9am-noon Sun Apr-Jun & Sep-mid-Oct, 9am-noon & 2-5.45pm Mon-Sat mid-Oct-Mar) is inside the Maison du Tourisme et des Vins, just off av du Général de Gaulle.

The post office, opposite place du 11 Novembre, has an exchange service.

Sights

GALLO-ROMAN RUINS

The ruined remains of Vasio Vocontiorum, the Roman city that flourished here from the 6th to 2nd centuries BC, are unearthened at two sites. The **Pass** (adult/child €8/3.50) ticket, valid for two days, includes admission to all Roman sites as well to the cathedral and cloister, and also includes a multilanguage audioguide.

At **Puymin** (av du Général de Gaulle; ☎ 9.30am-6.30pm Jun-Sep, 9am-6pm Apr & May, 10am-12.30pm & 2-5.30pm Mar & Oct, 10am-noon & 2-5pm Nov, Dec & Feb) you can see houses, mosaics, the still-functioning Théâtre Antique (built around AD 20 for an audience of 6000) and an **archaeological museum** (☎ 9.30am-6.30pm Jun-Sep, 9am-6pm Apr & May, 10am-12.30pm & 2-5.30pm Mar & Oct, 10am-noon & 2-5pm Nov, Dec & Feb) with a swag of statues – including likenesses of Hadrian and his wife Sabina.

Colonnaded shops, public baths' foundations and a limestone-paved street with an underground sewer are visible at **La Villasse** (☎ 10am-noon & 2.30-6.30pm Jun-Sep, 10am-noon & 2.30-6pm Apr & May, 10am-12.30pm & 2-5.30pm Mar & Oct, 10am-noon & 2-5pm Nov, Dec & Feb), to the west of the same road.

The 12th-century Romanesque **cloister** (☎ 10am-12.30pm & 2-6.30pm Jun-Sep, 10.30am-12.30pm & 2-6pm Apr & May, 10am-noon & 2-5pm Mar & Oct, closed Nov-Feb except school holidays) of the **Cathédrale Notre Dame**

de Nazareth is five minutes' walk west across rue du Bon Ange from Fouilles de la Villasse.

From April to September there are regular **guided tours** (French only; free for Pass ticket holders) of the sites, as well as thematic tours such as Roman gastronomy or daily life in Roman times. Check the schedule at the tourist office.

CITÉ MÉDIÉVALE

Across the pretty **Pont Romain** (Roman Bridge), cobblestone alleyways carve through the stone walls up to the Cité Médiévale. The highest point is home to an imposing 12th-century **château** built by the counts of Toulouse, which was modernised in the 15th century only to be later abandoned. Entry to the château is available by guided tours (in French, €2) only – check with the tourist office for schedules.

Sleeping

The tourist office has comprehensive accommodation lists, including details on *chambres d'hôtes* and self-catering places in the surrounding region. Hotels are few and far between.

Camping du Théâtre Romain (☎ 04 90 28 78 66; www.camping-theatre.com; chemin de Brusquet; camping per 2 people €15-20; ☎ 15 Mar-15 Nov; 🚰) Opposite Théâtre Antique in the northern section of the Fouilles de Puymin, the site is a little exposed to the Provençal sun but there is a pool in which to cool off.

Le Moulin de César (☎ 04 90 36 00 78; www.escapade-vacances.com/vaison; av César Geoffroy; d half-board €41-45; ☎ Mar-Nov) Around 500m southeast of town along the river, this modern family resort is set over peaceful, sprawling grounds on the edge of the river, with views of Mont Ventoux. This being France, half-board (obligatory) includes wine.

Hôtel Le Burrhus (☎ 04 90 36 00 11; www.burrhus.com; 1 place de Montfort; d €46-82) Right on Vaison's vibrant central square, this might look like a quaint old place from the outside, but inside, its 38 rooms have ultramodern decors with cutting-edge designer fittings, artists' works on the walls and lush mosaic bathrooms.

Hostellerie Le Beffroi (☎ 04 90 36 04 71; www.le-beffroi.com; rue de l'Évêché; d €75-140; ☎ Apr-Jan; 🚰) Within the medieval city's walls, this 1554-built *hostellerie* is housed over two buildings (the 'newer' one was built in 1690). A fairy-tale hideaway, its 22 rough-hewn stone-and-wood-beamed rooms are romantically furnished, and its restaurant (*menus* €28 to

(€45) is one of Vaison's good addresses. It's been in the same family since 1904.

L'Évêché (☎ 04 90 36 13 46; <http://eveche.free.fr>; rue de l'Évêché, Cité Médiévale; d €78-130) With its groaning bookshelves, vaulted ceilings, higgledy-piggledy staircase, intimate lounges and exquisite art gracing the walls, this five-room *chambre d'hôte* is absolutely divine. Owners Jean-Loup and Aude can recommend all manner of excursions and good addresses. They can also lend you bikes to explore the area.

Eating

Moulin à Huile (☎ 04 90 36 20 67; www.moulin-huile.com; quai Maréchal Foch; mains €22-65; ☎ lunch & dinner Tue-Sat, lunch Sun) Enjoy chef Robert Bardot's gastronomic prowess in the draped, stone-wall dining room of this old oil mill or on the delightful summer terrace by the river. Try a cross-section of his creations with the €75 tasting menu or pick and choose from the old-school handwritten *carte* (which is actually quite difficult to read!).

Bistro Du'O (☎ 04 90 41 72 90; rue du Château; menus around €25; ☎ lunch & dinner Tue-Sat, lunch Sun) Housed in an old stable, this classy establishment serves knock-out dishes in any combination of starters, mains and desserts. The menu is short and changes every day to keep everything super fresh. Presentation is a work of art and every mouthful is a riot of taste. The same goes for the wine list: the bistro works with a vineyard from the very fine Gigondas area, so you'll be spoiled for choice.

SELF-CATERING

Wines (available from the tourist office's on-site boutique), as well as honey and nougat, are local specialties, but nothing compares with the area's delectable black truffles from the surrounding hillsides. They don't come cheap – €500 to €1000 per kg depending on the season and rainfall – but a few shavings are enough to transform any dish.

A magnificent market, which has become an attraction in its own right, snakes through the central streets every Tuesday from 6.30am to 1pm.

Getting There & Away

The bus station, where **Autocars Lieutaud** (Vaison ☎ 04 90 36 05 22; av des Chorales; Avignon bus station ☎ 04 90 86 36 75) has an office, is 400m east of the town centre. There are limited services from Vaison to Orange (€5.10, 45 minutes),

Avignon (€7.70, 1½ hours) and Carpentras (€4.50, 45 minutes).

MONT VENTOUX

Visible from miles around, Mont Ventoux (1909m), nicknamed *le géant de Provence* (Provence's giant), stands like a sentinel over northern Provence. From its summit, accessible by road between May and October, vistas extend to the Alps and – on a clear day – as far as the Camargue.

Because of the mountain's dimensions, every European climate type is present on its slopes, from Mediterranean on its lower southern banks to Arctic on its exposed northern ridge. As you ascend the relentless gradients (which regularly feature in the Tour de France), temperatures can plummet by 20°C, and there's twice as much precipitation as on the plains below. The relentless mistral wind blows 130 days a year, sometimes at a speed of 250km/h. So bring warm clothes and rain gear, even in summer.

This unique and unusual climatic patchwork is reflected in the mountain's hugely diverse fauna and flora, which is now actively protected by Unesco Biosphere Reserve status.

In winter, visitors can take in the joys of snow at the **Mont Serein** (1445m) ski resort (www.stationdumontserein.com), 5km from Mont Ventoux' summit on the D974. The snow has generally all but melted by April, so the white glimmering stuff you can see in summer is not snow but are *lauzes* – broken white stones covering the top.

Piercing the sky to the west of Mont Ventoux are the spectacular limestone pinnacles of another walker's paradise, **Dentelles de Montmirail**. On the other side of the Dentelles sits the snug village of **Baumes de Venise**, home to Frances's finest muscat.

The most common starting point for forays into the Ventoux area is the town of **Malauène**, a former summer residence of the Avignon popes. It's about 10km south of Vaison-la-Romaine.

Information

Baumes de Venise Tourist Office (☎ 04 90 62 94 39; www.ot-baumesdevenise.com; place du marché; ☎ 9am-noon & 2-5pm Oct-Mar, to 6.30pm Apr-Jun, to 7pm Jul & Aug) Has plenty of info on the nearby Dentelles as well as a list and map of all the cellars and vineyards selling the famous muscat.

Destination Ventoux (www.destination-ventoux.com, in French)

Malaucène Tourist Office (☎ 04 90 65 22 59; ot-malucene@wanadoo.fr; place de la Mairie; ☏ 10am-noon & 3-5pm Mon-Fri & 10am-noon Sat) A mine of info for those keen to explore under their own steam, be it walking or cycling.

Provence des Papes (www.hautvaucluse.com)

Activities

WALKING

Running from the River Ardèche east, the GR4 crosses the Dentelles de Montmirail before scaling the northern face of Mont Ventoux, where it meets the GR9. Both trails traverse the ridge before the GR4 branches eastwards to the Gorges du Verdon (p854).

Continuing on the GR9 takes you across the Monts du Vaucluse and the Luberon Range. Lonely Planet's *Walking in France* has information on walking in the latter.

Maps

Didier-Richard's 1:50,000 map *Massif du Ventoux* includes Mont Ventoux, the Monts du Vaucluse and the Dentelles de Montmirail. It's available at some of the area's larger tourist offices, bookshops and newsagents. More detailed are IGN's Série Bleue 1:25,000 *Mont Ventoux* (ref 3140ET) and *Carpentras/Vaison-la-Romaine/Dentelles de Montmirail* (ref 3040ET).

All tourist offices in the area also provide dozens of walking itineraries, including the excellent *Randonnées dans les Dentelles* (15 detailed, detachable itineraries in French, English and German; €5) at Beaumes' office.

CYCLING

The Mont Ventoux is on par with Alpe d'Huez (p566) when it comes to epic, legendary, leg-breaking cycling ascents. So before you gingerly hop on your bicycle to tackle the beast, you should know that pros polish off the climb in about an hour (depending on wind, weather etc). A 1½ to two-hour trip makes you Tour de France potential, and even 2½ hours requires serious pedal power. So if you're just top of your spinning class back home, you're in for a slog.

Ventoux aside, there are plenty more less-demanding cycling options in the area. The tourist office can provide maps and itineraries such as *Massif du Mont Ventoux, 9 itinéraires VTT* (free, but in French only).

Getting There & Around

Mont Ventoux can be reached by car from Sault via the D164 or – in summer – from Malaucène or St-Estève via the switchback D974, often snow-blocked until April. For information on bus services in the area, see p851.

Mag 2 Roues (☎ 04 90 37 18 67; cours des Isnards), next to the tourist office in Malaucène, rents out bikes.

CARPENTRAS

pop 27,000

If you can, try to come to Carpentras on a Friday morning, when the streets spill over with more than 350 stalls laden with breads, honeys, cheeses, olives, nuts, fruit, nougat and a rainbow of *berlingots* – Carpentras' striped, pillow-shaped hard-boiled sweets. During winter there's also a truffle market, with its pungent smell and hushed-tones transactions.

Markets aside, Carpentras wasn't always as quiet as it is today. It became the capital of the papal territory of the Comtat Venaissin in 1320. Pope Clement V was a frequent visitor in the 14th century, during which time Jews expelled from French crown territory took refuge in the Comtat Venaissin under papal protection. The 14th-century synagogue is the oldest in use in France.

Orientation

A heart-shaped ring of boulevards replaced the city's fortifications in the 19th century; the largely pedestrianised old city sits inside.

If you're arriving by bus, walk north-eastwards to place Aristide Briand, a major intersection at the boulevards' southernmost point. The tourist office is across the crossroads on the small place 25 Août 1944. From here, the pedestrian-only rue de la République, which heads north, takes you to the 17th-century Palais de Justice and the cathedral.

Information

There are commercial banks on central place Aristide Briand and bd Albin Durand.

Blanc Ventoux Lavomatique (118 rue Porte de Montoux; ☏ 7am-8pm) Laundrette.

Post Office (65 rue d'Inguimbert)

Tourist Office (☎ 04 90 63 00 78; www.carpentras-ventoux.com; 97 place du 25 Août 1944; ☏ 9am-1pm & 2-7pm Mon-Sat, 9.30am-1pm Sun Jul & Aug, 9.30am-12.30pm & 2-6pm Mon-Sat Sep-Jun) Has an excellent website and organises guided city tours (adult/child

€4/2.50) in various languages from April to September. Also hands out a free English-language *Discovery Circuit* brochure, corresponding with a walking circuit of signposts marked with *berlingots*.

Sights

SYNAGOGUE

The centre of Jewish life for centuries and still a place of worship today, Carpentras' moving **synagogue** (☎ 04 90 63 39 97; place Juiverie; admission free; ☞ 10am-noon & 3-5pm Mon-Thu, 10am-noon & 3-4pm Fri) bears witness to the centuries of persecution that Jewish people have endured. Founded in 1367, it was rebuilt between 1741 and 1743 and restored in 1929 and 1954. In the 1st-floor wood-panelled sanctuary you can see 18th-century liturgical objects, while the ground floor houses older features such as the ablution basin and bakeries.

CATHEDRAL

Église St-Siffrein, once Carpentras' **cathedral** (☞ 7.30am-noon & 2-6.30pm, no visits during services), was built in the Méridional (southern French) Gothic style between 1405 and 1519 and is topped by a distinctive contemporary bell tower. Sadly, due to theft, its **Trésor d'Art Sacré** (Treasury of Religious Art) that holds precious 14th- to 19th-century religious relics is now not available for public viewing, except during the Fête de St-Siffrein (right).

MUSEUMS

Carpentras' museums are only open from April to September, from 10am to noon and 2pm to 6pm Wednesday to Monday. Admission is €2.

Musée Comtadin (243 bd Albin Durand), which displays artefacts relating to local history and folklore, and **Musée Duplessis** (243 bd Albin Durand), with paintings spanning nine centuries, are on the western side of the old city.

Musée Sobirats (112 rue du Collège), one block west of the cathedral, is an ornate 18th-century private residence filled with furniture, *faïence* and objets d'art in the Louis XV and Louis XVI styles.

The former 18th-century hospital in **Hôtel Dieu** (place Aristide Briand; ☞) by arrangement with tourist office) has an incredibly preserved old-fashioned **pharmacy** and a **chapel**. However, the museum closed for renovation in 2008, and at the time of writing it was not clear when it would reopen. Check with the tourist office for details.

Sleeping & Eating

Hôtel La Lavande (☎ 04 90 63 13 49; 282 bd Alfred Rogier; r €32-70) Well, you sure won't miss the nearly luminescent purple cladding of Hôtel La Lavande. Thankfully, the interior is not as brash, with basic, clean rooms. The place generally lacks charm but the restaurant downstairs (mains €7 to €15, open for lunch and dinner daily) serves genuine North African fare as well as traditional, quick lunchtime fixes.

Hôtel du Fiacre (☎ 04 90 63 03 15; www.hotel-du-fiacre.com; 153 rue Vigne; d €62-90; ☞) This endearing 18th-century mansion grows on you the minute you walk in: everything from the beautiful patio to the canopied beds, grand interior and genuine warmth of its owners will want to make you stay a little bit longer. There is a private car park for €5, and wi-fi throughout.

Les Palmiers (☎ 04 90 63 12 31; 77 place du Général de Gaulle; mains from €9; ☞ 7am-10pm) This cheap and cheerful brasserie is packed to the rafters at lunchtime with colleagues and friends tucking into the €9 *plat du jour* and greedily lapping their *café gourmand* (an espresso served with miniature desserts; in this case, a chocolate fondant and crème anglaise – a rich custard) before heading back to work.

Chez Serge (☎ 04 90 63 21 24; 90 rue Cottier; lunch/dinner menus €17/35, mains €20-35; ☞) lunch Sun-Fri, dinner Mon-Sat) Paris meets Provence by way of Armenia at this bistro where Serge serves up his culinary creations in a charming setting (love the old stone-wash basin in the patio). This being Carpentras, there is, of course, a good selection of truffle-flavoured dishes.

Shopping

Rue d'Inguibert and most of av Jean Jaurès (and often the streets spilling off) are the site of Carpentras' fantastic Friday morning market. The town gets *very* quiet in the long lunch hours following.

In winter, Carpentras' 'black diamonds' are traded at the **truffle market** (place Aristide Briand; ☞ 9-10am Fri late Nov-Mar), attended by brokers, merchants and wholesalers from all over France. Carpentras' biggest fair, held during the Fête de St-Siffrein (Feast of St Siffrein) on 27 November, marks the opening of the truffle season with more than 1000 stalls and sellers spilling across town.

A Hansel and Gretel fantasy, **Chocolats Clavel** (☎ 04 90 63 07 59; 30 Porte d'Orange; ☞ Mon-Sat) has spectacularly sculptured – and delicious – sweets.

Getting There & Away

The train station is served by goods trains only, so buses provide Carpentras' only inter-city public transport. The **bus station** (place Terradou) is 150m southwest of place Aristide Briand. Schedules are available from across the square at **Cars Comtadins** (☎ 04 90 67 20 25; 192 av Clemenceau) and from **Cars Arnaud** (☎ 04 90 63 01 82; 8 av Victor Hugo).

There are half-hourly services to Avignon (€4.40, 45 minutes) and about three services a day to Marseille (€14, two hours). There are also infrequent runs to Vaison-la-Romaine (€4.50, 45 minutes) via Malaucène and Bédoin (€4.20, 40 minutes) at the southwest-ern foot of Mont Ventoux; and to Cavaillon (€5.40, 45 minutes) and L'Isle-sur-Sorgue (€3.80, 25 minutes), 7km west of Fontaine de Vaucluse.

FONTAINE DE VAUCLUSE

pop 650

Aptly named, Fontaine (meaning fountain) is Provence's main tap: all the rain that falls within 1200 sq km gushes out here as the River Sorgue. It is the world's fifth most powerful spring – and France's most powerful – and has fascinated specialists for centuries. Jacques Cousteau was one of many who attempted, unsuccessfully, to plumb the spring's depths before an unmanned submarine touched base (at 315m) in 1985. It's at its most dazzling after heavy rain, but in drought times, the normally surging hole looks like something out of a Harry Potter book, with eerily calm emerald water.

Information

Tourist Office (☎ 04 90 20 32 22; www.oti-delasorgue.fr; chemin de la Fontaine; ☎ 9.30am–12.30pm & 1.30–5.30pm) Southeast of central place de la Colonne on the way to the spring. Has itineraries of local walks in French.

Sights

Most visitors come to see the spring, but this tiny village also has an eclectic collection of museums.

Musée d'Histoire 1939–1945 (☎ 04 90 20 24 00; chemin de la Fontaine; adult/student/under 12yr €3.50/1.50/free, combined ticket with Musée Pétrarque €4.60; ☎ 10am–6pm Wed–Mon Jun–Sep, 10am–noon & 2–6pm Wed–Mon Apr & May, 10am–noon & 2–6pm Sat & Sun Mar, Nov & Dec, 10am–noon & 2–5pm Oct) showcases the resistance movement during WWII.

Musée Pétrarque (☎ 04 90 20 37 20; rive Gauche de la Sorgue; adult/student/under 12yr €3.50/1.50/free;

☎ 10am–12.30pm & 1.30–6pm Wed–Mon Jun–Sep, 10am–noon & 2–6pm Wed–Mon Apr & May, 10am–noon & 2–5pm Oct) is devoted to the Italian Renaissance poet Francesco Petrarca, who lived in Fontaine de Vaucluse from 1337 to 1353. He expressed in heartbreaking verse his futile love for Laura, wife of Hugues de Sade.

At **Ecomusée du Gouffre** (☎ 04 90 20 34 13; chemin de la Fontaine; adult/child €5.50/4; ☎ 9.30am–7.30pm Jul & Aug, 10am–noon & 2–6pm Feb–Jun & Sep–mid–Nov), follow a caving expert along underground tunnels to learn more about Fontaine's mysterious spring, the history of caving and how humans have used caves since the beginning of time. The tour finishes with an incredible collection of crystals of all shapes and forms.

Sleeping & Eating

Ask the tourist office for a regularly updated list of *chambres d'hôtes*.

Auberge de Jeunesse (☎ 04 90 20 31 65; www.fuaj.org; chemin de la Vignasse; dm incl breakfast & sheets €16.20; ☎ reception 7.30–10am & 5.30–9pm, closed mid–Nov–Jan) In a lovely old farmhouse, about 800m south of Fontaine de Vaucluse in the direction of Lagnes, this peaceful hostel is popular with families and hikers (it's on the GR6 trail). In summer you can also pitch your tent in the garden. There's a good self-catering kitchen.

Hôtel du Poète (☎ 04 90 20 34 05; www.hoteldu-poete.com; r €90–310; ☎ closed late Dec–mid–Feb; ♿ ♿) Fall asleep to the relaxing sound of rushing water in lyrically named rooms, stretch out by the pool and ponds, or chill in a Jacuzzi that straddles a stream. Find this stunning water wonderland by the river bank as you enter the village.

La Figuière (☎ 04 90 20 37 41; www.la-figuiere.com; chemin de la Grangette; menus €20 & €28) Just off the main village square, La Figuière has set up shop in a beautiful stone house. In summer, you can savour the Provençal dishes (rabbit, aioli, sea bass etc) in the lovely front garden, or if you're staying in one of the three lovely *chambres d'hôtes*, wake up to the trickle of the fountain and a riot of cicadas.

Getting There & Away

Fontaine de Vaucluse is 21km southeast of Carpentras, 30km west of Apt, and 7km east of L'Isle-sur-Sorgue, a popular antiques centre. From Avignon, **Cars Arnaud** (☎ 04 90 82 07 35) has a bus (€4.80, one hour, two or three daily) with a stop at Fontaine de Vaucluse.

Fontaine is most easily reached by car, but you'll have to fork out for the privilege of parking (generally a €3 flat fee).

THE LUBERON

The Luberon's lush hills shot to fame following Peter Mayle's 1989 bestseller *A Year in Provence*, a light-hearted account of how he renovated a crumbling old farmhouse in deep rural Provence (just outside the village of Ménerbes), a story that highlighted classic English-French culture clash.

Until then the Luberon enjoyed a steady flow of dedicated Provence fans who came here for the area's rugged beauty, its relentless hills and cliffs, riot of purple, ochre, red and green, inhospitable forests and gastronomic treats (lavender honey, candied fruit, succulent fresh fruit, wines and much more).

Mayle's book, and subsequent works, triggered a huge interest in the Luberon, boosted by the existence of the 1200 sq km Parc Naturel Régional (the grade below a national park; see Maison du Parc, right) and a very fine cultural heritage that includes the Abbaye de Sénanque and the ancient, igloo-like stone *bories* (dry-walled huts; see the boxed text, opposite).

The region's capital, Apt, is a good base from which to explore the area. The Luberon stretches from Cavaillon in the west to Manosque in the east, and from St-Saturnin-lès-Apt southwards to the River Durance. You'll undoubtedly come across many charming *chambres d'hôtes* and restaurants as you go: stumbling across them is what Provence is all about.

There are plenty of buses that can take you in and out of the Luberon, but you'll really need your own wheels (motorised or leg-powered) to explore. **Le Luberon en Vélo** (www.veloloisirluberon.com) network has signposted a 236km cycling itinerary with suggested stops in towns and villages across the park.

Apt

pop 11,300

Sleepy little Apt comes alive with its Saturday morning market, brimming with local specialities. The town's festive spirit peaks during its wine and cheese festival, held on the Ascension (May or June), when up to 30 châteaux show off their wares. In summer, the town overflows with contentedly strolling visitors living the Provence dream.

ORIENTATION

Maps

For hard-core exploring, the tourist office sells regional maps such as the 1:25,000 IGN map (3242OT) *Apt/Parc Naturel Régional du Luberon* (€9.70), or the *Cavaillon* map (3142OT), for €9.70.

The Maison du Parc sells an extensive range of guides and maps, including for hiking and cycling – such as the recommended topoguide *Le Parc Naturel Régional du Luberon à Pied* (€13.20), which details 24 walks including the GR9, GR92 and GR97 trails (in French only).

INFORMATION

Maison du Parc (☎ 04 90 04 42 00; www.parcdu-luberon.fr, in French; 60 place Jean Jaurès; ☎ 8.30am-noon & 1-6pm Mon-Fri, 8.30am-noon Sat Apr-Sep, closed Sat & Sun Oct-Mar) Has information on the Parc Naturel Régional du Luberon and the history of the area.

Tourist Office (☎ 04 90 74 03 18; www.ot-apt.fr; 20 av Philippe de Girard; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Sat Jul & Aug, 9am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Sat Sep-Jun, 9.30am-12.30pm Sun May-Sep) Has enough suggestions for visits, excursions, activities and walks to last you an entire summer.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Retrace the steps of the industries that made Apt's fortunes at the **Musée de l'Aventure Industrielle du Pays d'Apt** (Industrial History Museum; ☎ 04 90 74 95 30; 14 place du Postel; adult/under 12yr €4/free; ☎ 10am-noon & 3-6.30pm Mon & Wed-Sat & 3-7pm Jun-Sun, 10am-noon & 2-5.30pm Mon & Wed-Sat Oct-May). In an old candied-fruit factory, it explains the area's candied-fruit trade, ochre mining and earthenware production from the 18th century.

SLEEPING & EATING

Camping Municipal Les Cèdres (☎ /fax 04 90 74 14 61; www.camping-les-cedres.fr, in French; rte de Rustrel; campsite €8.80; ☎ mid-Feb–mid-Nov) This back-to-basics riverside campsite is just out of town, with an Olympic-sized pool nearby.

Hôtel L'Aptois (☎ 04 90 74 02 02; www.aptois.fr, in French; 289 cours Lauze de Perret; d with bathroom €52-60, without bathroom €38-40) Found above an inexpensive café, this is a surprisingly stylish, cyclist-friendly hotel with good wheelchair access. It rents out bikes, which can be dropped off at points along the Le Luberon en Vélo bike routes. The rooms have colourful bedspreads and wallpapers.

Le Couvent (☎ 04 90 04 55 36; www.loucouvent.com, in French; 36 rue Louis Rousset; d incl breakfast €90-

WORTH A TRIP

You'll see beehive-shaped *bories* while you're buzzing around Provence, but the **Village des Bories** (☎ 04 90 72 03 48; adult/child €5.50/3; 🕒 9am-sunset) has some of the finest models.

Reminiscent of Ireland's *clochàn*, these one- or two-storey dry-walled huts constructed from slivers of limestone were first built in the area in the Bronze Age. Their original purpose isn't known (shelter would seem most likely), but over time they've also been used as workshops, wine cellars and storage sheds. This 'village' contains about 20, dating back to the 18th century. Getting here requires your own wheels. You'll find the village 4km southwest of **Gordes** (population 2100), just off the D2. Gordes' **tourist office** (☎ 04 90 72 02 75; www.gordes-village.com; place du Château; 🕒 9am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Sat, 10am-noon & 2-6pm Sun) has information.

About 5km north of Gordes (turn left on the D177 in direction of Venasque as you enter Gordes) is the stunning **Abbaye de Sénanque** (☎ 04 90 72 02 05; www.senanque.fr, in French; adult/student/under 18yr €7/5/3). Fronted by a huge lavender field at the bottom of an isolated valley, it features on every postcard rack in Provence – but seeing it with your own eyes is a different thing altogether. You can only visit through guided tours, which are in French only, although multilingual leaflets are available; see the website or ask local tourist offices for tour times.

For another Provençal colour to add to your palette, head to ochre-rich **Roussillon** (population 1200), between the Vaucluse plateau and the Luberon Range. Two millennia ago the Romans used this distinctive earth to produce pottery glazes. These days the whole village – even the cemetery's gravestones – is built of the reddish stone.

From Roussillon, take a 45-minute walk along the fiery-coloured **Sentier des Ogres** (Ochre Trail; admission €2.50; 🕒 9am-5pm Mar-11 Nov). The trail leads you through nature's powdery sunset-coloured palette of ochre formations that were created over centuries by erosion and winds. Don't wear white!

120; 📍 📞 📧) What you see today in this former 17th-century convent is the result of a painstaking labour of love: it was in ruins before Marie and Laurent worked to turn it into this exquisite B&B. At the time of our visit, plans were under way to increase the number of rooms from five to 12, turning it into a bona fide hotel. But, fear not – breakfast will still be served in the grand dining room, and there will still be classical music playing in the bathrooms.

Thym te voilà (☎ 04 90 74 28 25; 59 rue St-Martin; mains €10; 🕒 lunch Tue-Sat, dinner Fri & Sat, closed Christmas–mid-Apr) Head to this sweet little place for a taste of faraway climes combined with local staples. Lunch will be either in the sweet dining room or on the divine terrace on the square. Sadly, this is a short-lived treat, with the restaurant closing between Christmas and Easter.

Auberge du Luberon (☎ 04 90 74 12 50; www.auberge-luberon-peuzin.com; 8 place Faubourg du Ballet; lunch menu €29, dinner menus €35-57; 🕒 lunch & dinner Wed-Sat & dinner Tue, also open dinner Sun & Mon for hotel guests) Don't be fooled by the underwhelming appearance of this establishment on the bank of the river: here you'll find Apt's finest restaurant, the magnum opus of chef Serge Peuzin. The *menus* make much of Apt's

culinary treasures (truffles and candied fruit), as well seasonal highlights. The 14 guest rooms (doubles €58 to €98) here are a little tired-looking in their Provençal prints, but they're comfortable.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Buses going to Aix-en-Provence (€2, two hours, two daily) leave from the **bus station** (☎ 04 90 74 20 21; 250 av de la Libération) east of the centre. There are services to/from Avignon (€8.20, 1½ hours, eight daily), Digne-les-Bains (€11.40, 2¼ hours, one or two daily) and Cavaillon (€5.40, 45 minutes, four daily).

NORTHEASTERN PROVENCE

Northeastern Provence crowns the top of the Côte d'Azur with snowy peaks and spectacular Alp-cradled valleys.

The Route Napoléon, now the N85, which Bonaparte followed in 1815 en route to Paris after escaping from Elba, passes through Castellane. It continues north to Digne-les-Bains, a thermal spa retreat surrounded by

serried lavender fields. Further north again are the winter ski slopes and summer mountain retreats of the Ubaye and Blanche Valleys.

GORGES DU VERDON

Europe's largest canyon, the plunging Gorges du Verdon (also known as the Grand Canyon du Verdon) slices a 25km swath through Provence's limestone plateau.

The gorges begin at Rougon near the confluence of the Verdon and the Jabron Rivers, and wind westwards until the Verdon's green waters flow into Lac de Ste-Croix. A dizzying 250m to 700m deep, the gorges' floor is just 8m to 90m wide, with its overhanging rims 200m to 1500m apart.

The two main jumping-off points for exploring the gorges are the villages of Castellane (population 1592) and the magical Moustiers Ste-Marie (population 705), which has a centuries-old gold star on a 227m-long chain strung between its cliffs.

Information

Castellane Tourist Office (☎ 04 92 83 61 14; www.castellane.org; rue Nationale; ☹ 9am-1pm & 2-7pm Jul & Aug, 9.15am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Fri Sep-Jun)

Moustiers Ste-Marie Tourist Office (☎ 04 92 74 67 84; www.moustiers.fr; ☹ daily, hr vary monthly) This tip-top tourist office has resourceful staff and excellent documentation for exploring the area.

Sights & Activities

The gorges' depths are only accessible by foot or raft. Motorists and cyclists can take in staggering panoramas from two vertigo-inducing cliff-side roads.

CYCLING & DRIVING

The D952 corkscrews along the northern rim, past **Point Sublime**, which offers a fisheye-lens view of serrated rock formations falling away to the river below. The best view from the northern side is from **Belvédère de l'Escalès**, along rte de Crêtes (D23). Drive to the third bend and steel your nerves for the stunning drop-off into the gorge.

Also heart-palpitating, **La Corniche Sublime** (the D19 to the D71) twists along the southern rim, taking in landmarks such as the **Balcons de la Mescla** (Mescla Terraces) and **Pont de l'Artuby** (Artuby Bridge), the highest bridge in Europe.

A complete circuit of the Gorges du Verdon via Moustiers Ste-Marie involves about 140km of relentless hairpin-bend driving. Castellane's

and Moustiers' tourist offices have multilingual driving itineraries. The only village en route is **La Palud-sur-Verdon** (930m), 2km north-east of the northern bank of the gorges. In winter, roads can be icy or snowy, and heaven forbid that you get stuck behind a caravan in summer: opportunities to overtake on those single-lane roads are rare.

WALKING

From Point Sublime, the GR4 descends to the bottom of the canyon. Walkers and white-water rafters can experience an overwhelming series of cliffs and narrows. The GR4 is detailed by Didier-Richard's 1:50,000 map *Haute Provence-Verdon*. It's also included in the excellent English-language book *Canyon du Verdon – The Most Beautiful Hikes* (€4.60), available at the tourist offices, which lists 28 walks in the gorges. The multilingual *Canyon du Verdon* map also lists five walks with illustrated practical info. Bring a torch (flashlight) and drinking water. Short descents into the canyon are possible from a number of points. Camping on gravel beaches is illegal and dangerous because of sudden water level changes, which are due to the dam upstream.

OUTDOOR SPORTS

Castellane's and Moustiers' tourist offices have complete lists of companies offering rafting, canyoning, horse-riding, mountaineering, biking and more. Families should bear in mind that many activities are unsuitable for children under the age of eight.

Aboard Rafting (☎/fax 04 92 83 76 11; www.aboard-rafting.com; place de l'Église, Castellane; ☹ Apr-Sep) runs white-water rafting (€33 to €75) as well as canyoning trips (€33 to €65).

Adrenaline-seekers can throw themselves off the 182m Artuby Bridge for a heart-popping *saut à l'élastique* (bungee jump). Contact Marseille-based **Latitude Challenge** (☎ 04 91 09 04 10; www.latitude-challenge.fr, in French) for prices and schedules.

The newest thrill-seeking pursuit is 'floating' (€50/90 per half-/full day) – it's like white-water rafting minus the raft, with a buoyancy bag strapped to your back. Contact **Guides Aventure** (www.guidesaventure.com) for details.

Sleeping & Eating

Both tourist offices have lists of numerous campsites and accommodation options, as well as restaurants and food shops.

CASTELLANE & AROUND

The nearby river is lined with seasonal camping areas. Hotels and restaurants cluster around the central square, place Marcel Sauvaire and place de l'Église.

Domaine de Chasteuil Provence (☎ 04 92 83 61 21; www.chasteuil-provence.com; camping per site €11.90-22.80; ☽ May-mid-Sep; 📍) Just south of Castellane, this campsite has lovely, leafy grounds, optional powered sites, and timber chalets (from €335 for a week for four people).

Ma Petite Auberge (☎ 04 92 83 62 06; fax 04 92 83 68 49; 8 bd République; d €45-65; ☽ closed early Dec-early Mar) The key word in this establishment is 'simplicity'. The rooms are clean, basic and bright, with handy triples and quadruples for families or groups. The restaurant (*menus* from €15, open for lunch and dinner Friday to Tuesday) serves no-frills traditional French food at bargain prices.

MOUSTIERS & AROUND

Le Petit Lac (☎ 04 92 74 67 11; www.lepetitlac.com; rte du lac de Ste-Croix; tent per 2 people €13.90-19.90, 6-person eco-cabins per week from €359; ☽ camping mid-Jun-Sep, cabins Apr-mid-Oct; 📍) In a peaceful lakeside spot, this activity-oriented campsite has great eco-cabins (two-night minimum) with hemp walls, solar hot water and low-output electricity.

Le Clos des Iris (☎ 04 92 74 63 46; www.closdesiris.fr; chemin de Quinson; d €63-120) The ode to Provence that is Le Clos des Iris comprises nine beautifully decorated rooms, with colourful tiled bathrooms and individual access to either the garden or a balcony. In summer, the garden loungers are perfect for topping up your tan or for finishing a novel.

La Ferme Rose (☎ 04 92 74 69 47; www.lafermerose.com; chemin de Quinson; d €78-148; 📍) This fabulous converted farmhouse contains wonderfully quirky collections including antique toys, a Wurlitzer jukebox with 45rpm records, a display case of coffee grinders, and old telephones, telex machines, theatre lighting, projectors and a puppet theatre. Its dozen boutique rooms with their Provençal-colonial styles all have spectacular bathrooms. It's off the D952, 1km from Moustiers.

La Bastide de Moustiers (☎ 04 92 70 47 47; www.bastide-moustiers.com; d €160/335; menus €42-57; 📍 📍) This exquisite Provençal nest belonging to legendary chef Alain Ducasse is known up and down the country for its very fine cuisine – hence the helicopter pad in the garden. Rooms are equally sophisticated and

breakfast is served on a terrace shaded by an old plane tree. The tree was saved in 1974 from the now-flooded village of Les Salles-sur-Verdon, following the completion of the Ste-Croix dam.

For local fare, dine under the oak trees at **Côté Jardin** (☎ 04 92 74 68 91; rue de Lérins; mains €19-27; ☽ closed Wed, dinner Tue low season, closed Nov & Dec), or try the fabulous **La Treille Muscate** (☎ 04 92 74 64 31; place de l'Église; menus €20-34; ☽ closed Thu & dinner Wed low season, closed Wed high season, closed mid-Nov-Jan).

Getting There & Away

Public transport to, from and around the Gorges du Verdon is limited. **Autocars Sumian** (☎ 04 42 54 72 82) runs buses from Marseille to Castellane (€19.90, 3½ hours) via Aix-en-Provence and Moustiers (€14.40, 2¼ hours).

Getting Around

Daily in July and August, and at weekends from April to September, the Navettes des Gorges (the gorges' shuttle) links Castellane with Point Sublime, La Palud, La Maline and Moustiers. Ask at the tourist offices for schedules; tickets cost €6. Both tourist offices (opposite) have bike rental information.

DIGNE-LES-BAINS

pop 17,600

The latter part of the name Digne-les-Bains refers to its thermal activity: the town's spring spurts out 49°C water, rich in minerals long known to help alleviate rheumatism and respiratory conditions such as asthma. It was the Romans who first spotted the spring, but 2000 years later, the French health system still sends some of its patients to Digne for treatment.

However, thermal activity aside, Digne is still a sleepy provincial town, nestled at the foot of the Alps. The town feels very isolated, almost other-worldly, which is perhaps why famous French adventurer Alexandra David-Néel decided to settle here for want of Tibetan wilderness. The geological sites in the surrounding area are world class, and so are the intensely purple summer lavender fields that flourish in Digne's dry climate.

Orientation

Digne hugs the eastern bank of the shallow River Bléone. The major roads into town converge at the Rond Point (roundabout) du 11 Novembre, 400m northeast of the train

station. The main street, bd Gassendi, heads northeastwards from the roundabout and passes the large place du Général de Gaulle, the town's main square.

Information

Cybercafé (☎ 04 92 32 00 19; 48 rue de l'Hubac; internet access 1st 10min €1.50, per min thereafter €0.06; ☎ 10am-noon & 2-7pm Tue-Sat) In the centre of the town.

Laverie (☎ 04 92 31 11 75; 99 bd Gassendi; ☎ 9am-7pm)

Relais Départemental des Gîtes de France (☎ 04 92 31 30 40; www.gites-de-france.com; ☎ 8.30am-noon & 2-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon Sat) Adjacent to the tourist office. It can book *gîtes* in the area.

Tourist Office (☎ 04 92 36 62 62; www.ot-dignelesbains.fr; place du Tampinet; ☎ 10am-7pm Mon-Sat Jul & Aug, 10am-noon & 3-6pm Sun mid-Jun-Sep, 9am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Fri Sep-Jun, 9am-noon Sat Sep-Mar, 9am-noon & 2-6pm Sat Apr-Jun) Has comprehensive regional info including walking and cycling maps.

Sights & Activities

FONDATION ALEXANDRA DAVID-NÉEL

Tibetan culture is celebrated at the **Fondation Alexandra David-Néel** (☎ 04 92 31 32 38; www.alexandra-david-neel.org; 27 av Maréchal Juin; admission free; ☎ 2hr tours 10am, 2pm & 3.30pm), in memory of Paris-born writer and philosopher Alexandra David-Néel, who made two incognito voyages to Tibet in the 1900s before settling in Digne. Her adventures, recounted in several books, inspired generations of travellers. The collection of B&W pictures David-Néel took during her trips is outstanding, and the Tibetan art room is an unusual jewel in the predominantly Roman heritage of this part of the world. Drive 1km along the Nice road or take bus 3 to the Stade Rolland stop.

MUSÉE GASSENDI

Everything from modern art to still lifes and exhibits on the 16th-century philosopher/scientist/painter Pierre Gassendi are displayed at the **Musée Gassendi** (☎ 04 92 31 45 29; 64 bd Gassendi; adult/child €4/2; ☎ 11am-7pm Wed-Mon Apr-Sep, 1.30-5.30pm Wed-Mon Oct-Mar) in the town centre.

RÉSERVE NATURELLE GÉOLOGIQUE DE HAUTE PROVENCE

Prehistoric birds' footprints, outsized ammonites and ram's horn spiral shells are some of the amazing fossil deposits in the **Réserve Naturelle Géologique**, which surrounds Digne. Getting to the 18 sites requires your own

wheels; ask the tourist office for a detailed regional map.

The **Musée Promenade** (☎ 04 92 36 70 70; www.reegeo04.org; adult/child €4.60/2.75; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-7pm Mon-Fri & 10.30am-12.30pm & 2-7pm Sat & Sun Jul & Aug, 9am-noon & 2-5.30pm Sat-Thu & to 4.30pm Fri Apr-Jun, Sep & Oct, 9am-noon & 2-5.30pm Mon-Thu, to 4.30pm Fri Nov-Mar), 2km north of town off the road to Barles, contains aquarium tanks, insect displays, and artistically presented fossils and plants put into evolutionary context. Take TUD bus 2 to the Champourcin stop; then take the road to the left.

THERMAL SPA

Ahhh... Float in the thermal pool, slather yourself in mud and seaweed, or luxuriate in a lavender bath at the **Établissement Thermal** (☎ 04 92 32 58 46; www.eurothermes.com, in French; ☎ Mar-early Dec), 2km east of Digne's centre. A 50-minute essential oil massage costs €50.

Sleeping & Eating

France's first *gîte* was founded here in 1951; the headquarters of the Relais Départemental des Gîtes de France (left) has a list of locations.

Hôtel Central (☎ 04 92 31 31 91; www.lhotel-central.com; 26 bd Gassendi; s €31-49, d €39-53) With its traditional dark-wood furniture, beamed ceiling and brightly coloured quilts, the impeccable rooms of this (indeed) very central hotel are an unexpected bargain. There is also free wi-fi and the staff can recommend places to eat or visit.

Hôtel de Provence (☎ 04 92 31 32 19; 17 bd Thiers; s €40, d €50-58; (P)) This family-run hotel offers plenty in the way of comfort (it was entirely renovated in 2008) but not a huge amount in the way of charm. The 'family' welcome can also be a tad chaotic. However, it does have a few parking spaces, and wi-fi, so it is a practical option.

our pick **Hôtel Villa Gaia** (☎ 04 92 31 21 60; www.hotelvillagaia.fr; 24 rte de Nice; d €65-102, with half-board €148-170; ☎ Apr-Oct) Set in Italianate fountained gardens, the 1730 Villa Gaia is a timeless, utterly charming place. Anne-Françoise and Georges-Eric have opted for a beautiful wood-fired hammam rather than a swimming pool, and they serve simple, homemade food made with organic produce from their garden. Rooms have retained their period charm; children are well catered for with great family rooms. Dinner in the grand dining room or

the terrace overlooking the valley is heavenly. Find the villa 2km southwest of town in the direction of Nice.

Le Grand Paris (☎ 04 92 31 11 15; www.hotel-grand-paris.com; 19 bd Thiers; d €88-137) Carpeted walls, heavy period furniture, chandeliers – you get the picture. This is Digne's elegant address, a vestige of the town's heyday as a thermal destination. But just like a good vintage, Le Grand Paris is going through old age gracefully, thanks in particular to the care of three generations of Ricaud. The restaurant (mains €23 to €37) has a lovely garden for alfresco dining.

Le Chaudron (☎ 04 92 31 24 87; 40 rue Hubac; mains €14-17; ☺ lunch & dinner Tue-Sat) Digne's unsung gastronomic treasure serves wonderful traditional cuisine at unbeatable prices: try the house speciality, the chef's great-grandmother's recipe of *pieds paquets* (pork-stuffed lamb), or the *filet mignon de porc à la crème aux morilles* (tenderloin pork in morel and crème-fraîche sauce).

SELF-CATERING

Wednesday and Saturday mornings are market days, with markets held on place du Général de Gaulle.

Stock up on groceries at the **8 à Huit** (33 bd Gassendi; ☺ 8.30am-12.30pm & 3.30-7.30pm).

Getting There & Away

The **bus station** (☎ 04 92 31 50 00; place du Tampinet; ☺ 6.30am-7.30pm Mon-Sat) is behind the tourist office. Destinations include Nice (€15.60, 2½ hours) via Castellane (€5.60, 1¼ hours), Marseille (€15.10, 2½ hours) and Gap (€9.50, 1½ hours).

A shuttle bus links Digne with Aix-en-Provence's TGV station (€12.20, 1¾ hours), timed to coincide with the TGV to and from Paris, and with Marseille's airport (€14.50, 2¼ hours).

Even though Digne has a train station, there are no SNCF services running from the station. The only service that comes into Digne is the privately operated Train des Pignes from Nice (see boxed text, right).

Gallardo (☎ 04 92 31 05 29; 8 cours des Arès; ☺ 8am-noon & 2-7pm Tue-Fri, to 6pm Sat) rents out bikes (€14 per day).

THE PROVENCE ALPS

The terrain is mountainous but the sunshine (in excess of 300 days a year) is definitely Provençal. This combination hasn't escaped

THE PINE CONE TRAIN

Chug along a picturesque, narrow-gauge railway on the **Train des Pignes** (the Pine Cone Train). Operated by **Chemins de Fer de Provence** (www.trainprovence.com; Digne ☎ 04 92 31 01 58; Nice ☎ 04 97 03 80 80), the entire trip from Digne to Nice's Chemins de fer de Provence station (4bis rue Alfred Binet) takes about 3¼ hours (€17.65, four daily each direction).

the attention of utility company Suez, who is building Europe's biggest solar power station in the village of Curbans near the Vallée de la Blanche.

Vallée de la Blanche

Remote and sparsely populated, the beautiful Vallée de la Blanche (www.valleedelablanc.com) is an unspoiled nature haven. The main 'resort' (although, it's so tiny that it seems funny to call it a resort), is the 1350m **St-Jean Montclar**. Set up in the 1970s by a farmers' cooperative desperate to stem the demographic decline of the area, it turned unfarmable land into a rather successful holiday destination. It's particularly great for families, with skiing in winter and trekking galore in summer. The **tourist office** (☎ 04 92 30 92 01; www.montclar.com) has plenty of info. The area is also the home of Montclar spring water, but you won't need to buy it while you're here – just turn on the tap.

One of the sweetest *chambres d'hôtes* is **Les Alisiers** (☎ 04 92 35 30 88; fax 04 92 35 02 72; d incl breakfast €52-56, 4-person self-catering apt per week €200-500; ☺ closed mid-Nov–mid-Dec), 800m past the ski station on your left as you head south. The chalet faces breathtaking 180-degree views of the surrounding peaks and valleys. For dinner, try the scrumptious *picatons* (tiny raviolis baked in a creamy, cheesy sauce with mushrooms) at the next door restaurant (☎ 04 92 35 34 90; mains €15; open for lunch and dinner Thursday to Tuesday).

St-Jean Montclar is 50km north of Dignes-Bains. Between late December and March, there's a bus service from Gap (€12, 45 minutes).

Vallée de l'Ubaye

At the edge of the wild, isolated **Parc National du Mercantour** (see boxed text, p858), the Vallée de l'Ubaye is ringed by a rollercoaster

WONDERFUL MERCANTOUR

Deeply isolated and breathtakingly beautiful, the **Parc National du Mercantour** (www.mercantour.eu) is one of the last bastions of true wilderness in France. Spread across six valleys (Roya-Béréva, Vésubie, Tinée, Haut Var, Haut Verdon and Ubaye) and 685 sq km along the Italian border, it mixes Alpine snowy peaks with Mediterranean warmth.

The park was set up in 1979 and twinned with the Italian Alpi Marittime national park. Together, they form the first and only cross-border national park in Europe. Proof of this success was the controversial return of the wolf to France in 1992 from Italy, via the national park, after more than 70 years of absence. There are only about 50 wolves roaming the French side (in comparison with 1800 in Italy), but their presence has been highly unpopular with sheep farmers, because of attacks on flocks.

In a bid to show both sides of the debate, the mayor of the little town of St-Martin-Vésubie (pop 1146) decided in 2005 to open **Alpha** (☎ 04 93 02 33 69; www.alpha-loup.com; Le Boréon; adult/child €10/8; 🕒 10am-6.30pm Jun-Aug, to 6pm mid-Apr–May, 10am-6.30pm Tue, Sat & Sun Sep, 10am-5pm Sat-Wed Oct–mid-Nov, check with park directly for rest of year), a themed park exploring the pros and cons of the wolf's presence. Set high in the mountains of Le Boréon, three informative animated projections shown in renovated mountain stables present the arguments of scientists, sheep farmers and forest rangers. Further up in the park, visitors can also watch wolves in semiwild enclosures: the enclosures are big so that you may not see the wolves but you'll most certainly hear them. Their howling is absolutely enthralling.

In St-Martin-Vésubie, **La Bonne Auberge** (☎ 04 93 03 20 49; www.labonneauberge06.fr, in French; 98 allée de Verdun; d €50) is a wonderful stopover, with its huge fireplace and divine mountain fare (*menus* €20 to €27). The **tourist office** (☎ 04 93 03 21 28; place Félix Faure; 🕒 9am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Sat, 9am-noon Sun Sep-Jun, longer hr summer) has plenty of information on walks and activities in this part of the park, including how to see some of the 36,000 outstanding Bronze Age **stone carvings** (visible only in summer) in the **Vallée des Merveilles** (Valley of Wonders), part of the Roya Valley. Public transport is minimal in the area but **TRAM** (☎ 04 93 85 92 60) operates two daily buses between Nice and St Martin.

of rugged mountains. The area's main town, **Barcelonnette** (population 2766), experienced strong emigration to Mexico in the 19th century. A few decades and many fortunes later, migrants returned to Barcelonnette and built bourgeois mansions with their Mexican monies, resulting in some very un-Alpine architecture. Rising 8.5km south-west are the twin ski resorts of **Pra Loup 1500** (sometimes called Les Molanes) and **Pra Loup 1600** (which has more infrastructure and nightlife). Both are connected by a lift system with the ski resort of La Foux d'Allos. Pra Loup's 50 lifts are between 1600m and 2600m, with 180km of runs and a vertical drop of almost 1000m. In summer, it's a hiker's and mountain biker's heaven (Pra Loup has been hosting the Mountain Bike Masters World Championship since 2007, and will host it for the last time in 2009).

Pra Loup's dynamic **tourist office** (☎ 04 92 84 10 04; www.praloup.com; 🕒 9am-noon & 2-6pm Jul & Aug,

9am-noon & 2-5pm Mon-Fri May, Jun & Sep-Nov, 9am-7pm Dec-Apr) and **École de Ski Français** (ESF; ☎ 04 92 84 11 05), the main ski school in France, are in Pra Loup 1600. Ski passes cost €27.50 per day.

Studios and apartments start from around €200 per week, climbing to around €800 in the peak ski season – the tourist office has lists. There's also a handful of hotels, like the wonderful storybook chalet **Hôtel Le Prieuré** (☎ 04 92 84 11 43; www.prieure.eu, in French; Pra Loup 1500; d €55-90, half-board per person €57-68; 🍷 🍷), just across the road from the ski lift, with a restaurant (mains €13 to €26.55) serving heart-warming fondue.

The nearest train station to Pra Loup is at Gap, from where buses (usually a couple a day) travel to Barcelonnette (€7, 1½ hours). There is also one bus a day between Barcelonnette and Digne (€8.90, 1½ hours). Free shuttles operate between Barcelonnette and Pra Loup.

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