

Discover PROVENCE BY RIVER

Take to the waters of the mighty Rhône to explore some of the best-loved treasures in this picturesque region

The Gothic Palais des Papes in Avignon, built in the 14th century, stands behind the four remaining arches of the Pont St-Bénézet, once known as the Pont d'Avignon.

With its superb colour palette, beautiful light and varied landscape and history providing endless inspiration, it is not hard to see why the likes of van Gogh, Gauguin and many artists since have been drawn to Provence. But artists are not the only people who flock here. Each year, 1.5 million British visitors are equally charmed by the area's photogenic fields of lavender, groves of gnarly olive trees, Roman relics and fortified towns. Part of the administrative region of Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur, which stretches from the Italian border along 900km of Mediterranean coast to Languedoc-Roussillon and Rhône-Alpes in the north, Provence is vast and diverse, leaving visitors spoilt for choice.

TAKING TO THE WATER

The mighty River Rhône, on the westernmost border of Provence, provides the means for visitors to journey into its heart with ease – doing away with the need for hire cars and time wasted navigating the poor road signage. Further north, narrower channels offer the chance to cycle the towpath and take in the vistas of rolling Côtes du Rhône vineyards. Many of Provence's most iconic sights, such as the Pont du Gard north of Nîmes, are within easy reach of the river.

VISITING HISTORICAL ARLES

Disembark in the riverside city of Arles to discover the remarkable legacy of the Romans in Provence: a well-preserved amphitheatre

(where bullfights still take place from April to September), a Roman obelisk in the former circus and Roman baths that were once Provence's largest. In the Place du Forum, two remaining columns of the Roman forum are embedded into the structure of the city's most famous hotel, the Grand Hôtel Nord-Pinus. Visit the square at night to see the golden glow of Le Café de Nuit, immortalised by van Gogh.

AVIGNON AND ITS ENVIRONS

The journey upstream towards Avignon passes by two ancient fortresses on opposite sides of the river: the blocky Tarascon Castle in Provence and, peering over the Languedoc tree-line, Beaucaire Castle. The banks of the Rhône are peppered with such relics, nudging up

alongside industry that uses this critical artery. The landmark of the stunted Pont St-Bénézet – made famous by the French song *Sur le pont d'Avignon* – signals one's arrival in the former papal city. Behind the bridge towers the majestic Palais des Papes.

Avignon is the perfect jumping-off point for excursions that reveal the breadth and beauty of Provence. Besides Avignon's papal palace and artisan boutiques, you can visit the Grand Servan, a Provençal country house and olive oil farm, near Tarascon; or head to a lavender distillery, such as Bleu Provence in Nyons. A must-visit is Saint-Rémy-de-Provence to see the Roman relics known as Les Antiques, the archaeological site of Glanum, and the monastery of Saint-Paul-de-Mausole. It was in

this refuge that, in 1889, van Gogh spent the most productive year of his life, and visitors can still enter the room where he once slept and gaze out on the fields of lavender and iris to which he awoke.

THE RHONE WINELANDS

Beyond Avignon, Châteauneuf-du-Pape is the highlight of any excursion to the Rhône winelands. Here, in the shadow of the ruins of the papal summer residence, vigneron produce the varied vintages of the southern Rhône's most famous appellation. There are tasting rooms in the village as well as at individual châteaux, such as the respected Château La Nerthe, which offers tastings by appointment.

EATING & DRINKING

Provence is renowned for fresh vegetables transformed into dishes, such as ratatouille, gratin d'aubergine and pistou soup; it also boasts superb Mediterranean seafood, saffron and lavender. Sample local fare at **Les Halles**, Avignon's covered market, or book a table at nearby **Restaurant Christian Etienne** (christian-etienne.fr). If you like truffles, try the bistro of **Restaurant Le Poème de Grignan** (lepoeme-degrignan.com) or the restaurant named after the "king of truffles", **Clément Bruno** (restaurantbruno.com) in Lorgues, towards St Tropez. ▶

FIVE ACTIVITY HOLIDAYS BY THE RHÔNE

ARLES FOR ART LOVERS

When visiting the annual photographic festival Les Rencontres d'Arles, which this year runs from 4 July to 18 September, stay at Galerie Huit, a gallery-cum-chambres-d'hôtes set in a 17th-century mansion. Breakfast is served in the cool courtyard, a distinctive feature of many historic Arlesian homes. On the top floor is a self-contained artist's studio. Doubles from €90. **Galerie Huit, 8 Rue de la Calade, 13200 Arles, 0033 4 90 97 77 93, galeriehuit.com.**

MEALS ON WHEELS IN LYON

The Rhône's furthest navigable point is at Lyon, a foodie haven. The hottest table is Paul Bocuse's L'Auberge du Pont de Collonges (bocuse.fr); also try Nicolas Le Bec (nicolaslebec.com), where rising star Taka Takano is now head chef. Hire one of Lyon's Vélo'v bicycles (like Boris bikes) to take a culinary tour, and stay at the Art Deco Collège Hôtel. Doubles from €125 (excluding breakfast). **Collège Hôtel, 5 Place Saint-Paul, 69005 Lyon, 0033 4 72 10 05 05, college-hotel.com.**

AVIGNON'S PROVENÇAL KITCHEN

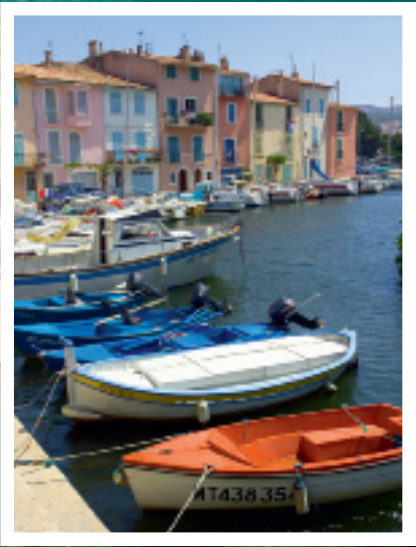
Just outside the towering walls of the Palais des Papes, the understated exterior of La Mirande belies the fact that, within, is one of the city's best hotels and also one of Provence's finest cooking schools. Courses at Le Marmiton cooking school (la-mirande.fr) take place in a 19th-century basement kitchen and are led by chefs from Avignon and Provence. Doubles at La Mirande from €310. **Hôtel La Mirande, 4 Place de l'Amirande, 84000 Avignon, 0033 4 90 14 20 20, la-mirande.fr.**

THE BEST OF INLAND PROVENCE

Hôtel Crillon le Brave, in the hilltop town of the same name, is an ideal base to enjoy the region's bounty, from tasting fine wines and truffle hunting to trawling the antiques markets. In late September, guests can join winemaker Paul Chaudière at Château Pesquié for the grape harvest, while keen cyclists can tackle Mont Ventoux on the hotel's mountain bikes. Doubles from €250. **Hôtel Crillon Le Brave, Place de l'Eglise, 84410 Crillon-le-Brave, 0033 4 90 65 61 61, crillonlebrave.com.**

A DATE WITH HISTORY IN UCHAUX

The legacy of the Romans, popes and royalty is never far away in Provence. The 16th-century Château de Massillan, 8km from the ancient city of Orange, is a former hunting lodge and now a boutique hotel. Extended in the 17th century, it has recently had a much newer lease of life thanks to co-owner and London-based interior designer Birgit Israel. Activities include riding, walking and canoeing. Doubles from €120. **Château de Massillan, Chemin Hauteville, 84100 Uchaux, 0033 4 90 40 64 51, chateau-de-massillan.com.**



OPPOSITE PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT

A village girl dances the farandole in the Cérémonie de l'Aubade (dawn serenade), a traditional event held throughout Provence the day before Christmas; street markets ensure the pick of local produce; swathes of lavender outside Abbaye Notre-Dame de Sénanque; the colourful waterfront at Martigues, near the mouth of the Rhône; vines ripen on the hillside; the Quai Saint-Antoine street market in Lyon where the Rhône and Saône converge; one of the many bridges that span the Rhône at Lyon.

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The classically styled Jardin de la Fontaine in Nîmes; shutters in Arles, painted to match the Provence sky; the beach at Calanque d'En Vau not far from Marseille; the chateau of Good King René, the last ruler of Provence, sits beside the Rhône at Tarascon.



FLOAT IN LUXURY

One of the most relaxing ways to see the Rhône and its sights is aboard a luxury barge (*peniche*) hotel. The 129ft *Napoléon* cruises the Rhône between Arles and Tain-l'Hermitage weekly during the summer, and is recognisable by its blue and white hull, sundeck lined with loungers and hot tub. The salon is furnished with comfortable sofas in Provençal-print fabrics,

antiques and fresh flowers, while the complimentary bar is well stocked with everything from champagne to Courvoisier. A stone bust of Napoleon appears above the staircase down to the guest cabins with their Frette linen and Provençal-tile-lined bathrooms. Murals in the dining room depict some of Provence's most famous places and faces, such as Nostradamus.

■ The *Napoléon* runs from 3 April to 23 October from £3,200 per person per week (charters from £31,500), including first-class return transfers by TGV from Paris, all meals and drinks, private sightseeing and local transfers.
 ■ Eurostar offers direct weekly services from London St Pancras to Avignon, from 9 July to 10 September 2011, from £109 return. Contact 0843 218 6186, eurostar.com.

ADDRESS BOOK

- **Le Palais des Papes**, 0033 4 90 27 50 00, palais-des-papes.com.
- **Grand Servan** (open by appointment), 0033 4 90 43 57 90, grandservan.com.
- **Distillerie Bleu Provence**, 0033 4 75 26 10 42, distillerie-bleu-provence.com.
- **Château La Nerthe** (tastings by appointment), 0033 4 90 83 70 11, chateaulanerthe.fr. ■

WORDS: KATE CROCKETT
 PHOTOGRAPHS: ALAMY, ROBERT HARDING