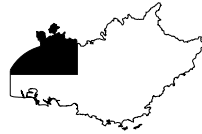


Avignon Area



Shaped like a fan, the *département* of the Vaucluse (from the Provençal Vau-Cluso, meaning 'closed valley') opens up across variegated landscapes of red poppies and bright yellow sunflowers, plane-shaded village squares, laden grapevines, olive groves, cloudlike almond blossoms, and deep purple lavender. Scattered throughout are golden-stone villages.

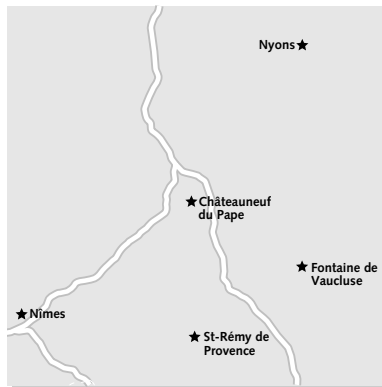
At its hinge the capital, Avignon, is resplendent thanks to its former popes, who left an architectural legacy of imposing palaces, a viticultural legacy in neighbouring Châteauneuf du Pape, and an artistic legacy that takes to the stage each July during Avignon's renowned performing arts festival. Skirted by soaring, superbly intact stone ramparts, its cobbled streets overflow with animated cafés, a wealth of museums within grand old mansions, and a spirited student population from the city's university.

Northwest of Avignon, Roman relics of imperial proportions rise up in Orange and across the River Rhône in Nîmes. To the northeast, Vaison-la-Romaine also has a rich Roman legacy, with the largest archaeological site in France. Nearby Carpentras' magnificent markets overflow with jars of lavender honey, loaves of oven-warm bread, a rainbow of hardboiled sweets, and, in season, elusive, earthy black truffles. East of Avignon, crystal-clear water surges from Fontaine de Vaucluse to the canals encircling the antique markets of Île-sur-la-Sorgue. To Avignon's south, the silvery ridge of the Alpilles shelters olive mills, sheepfolds, and some of the region's finest dining in and around St-Rémy de Provence.

Presiding over the region – and fanning it with up to 300km/h winds – Provence's high-altitude peak, Mont Ventoux (1909m), is a snowy spectacle in winter and a maze of hiking trails in summer.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Sip wine amid the stone-cruled vineyards of **Châteauneuf du Pape** (see the boxed text, p170)
- Savour the exquisite flavours of the Alpilles in and around **St-Rémy de Provence** (p189)
- Stroll among shady olive groves at **Nyons** (p176)
- Paddle through sparkling spring water from its source at **Fontaine de Vaucluse** (p187)
- Catch a classical concert or bloodthirsty bullfight in the Roman arena, Les Arènes, in **Nîmes** (p195)



ITINERARIES

CYCLING CIRCUIT

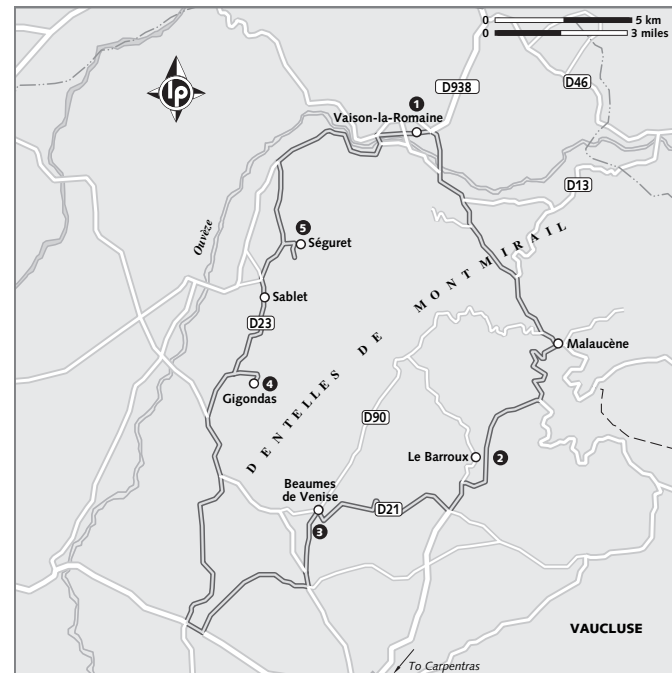
One Day / Dentelles de Montmirail

Looping the lacy limestone **Dentelles de Montmirail** (p177) outcrop makes a spectacular, sensory day trip from **Vaison-la-Romaine** (1; p173). Gear up with a hearty breakfast at one of Vaison's charming **chambres d'hôtes** (private bed and breakfast accommodation; p175). Then pedal off on your bike (or cruise in your car) in the direction of Carpentras.

On the D938 wind around the Dentelles' eastern edge to the little hilltop village of **Le Barroux** (2; p177), where you can visit its **medieval chateau** (p177), and pick up a monk-made cake for morning coffee at its **abbey** (p177).

From Le Barroux, take the westbound D21 to **Beaumes de Venise** (3; p177) to taste its locally milled **olive oil** (p177) and liquid-gold **wine** (p179). And for a taste of life on a **working ecological farm** (p179) with vineyards of its own, scoot 7.5km southwest via the D21 and D52 to Sarrians.

Afterwards, follow the D52 north from Sarrians, and continue on the D7 via Vacqueyras, spearing east to **Gigondas** (4; p179) to set eyes on a striking set of **sculptures** (p179). It's just 2km further north on the D7 to Sablet, where your pedal-weary legs can rest over a languidly long lunch at a honey of a restaurant/*chambre d'hôte*, **Les Abeilles** (p179). Then make your way 3km north on the D23 to **Séguret** (5; see the boxed text, p179), guardian of Provençal Christmas traditions, and forge a final 9.5km northeast via the D88 and D977 back to Vaison-la-Romaine.



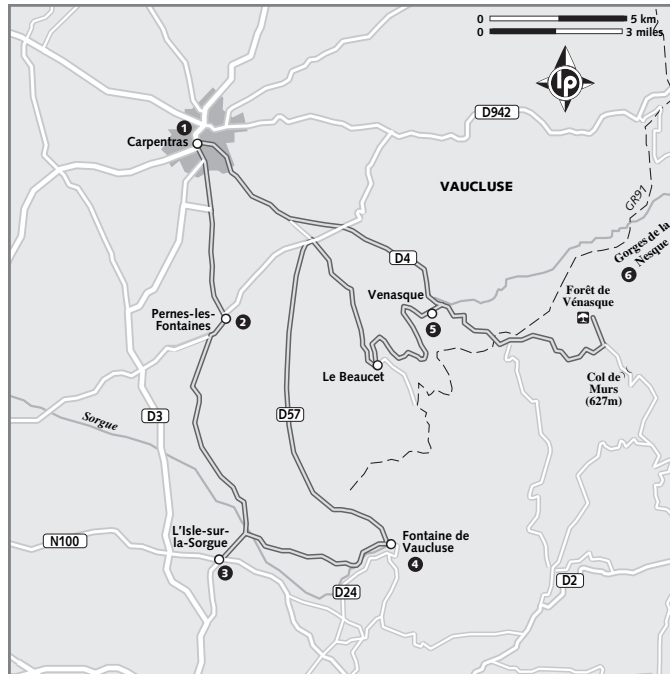
WATER WONDERLAND

One Day / Around Carpentras

Flowing from **Carpentras** (1; p182) is a water world of fountains, mossy water wheels, gushing springs and breathtaking gorges.

Travelling 5km south of Carpentras brings you to **Pernes-les-Fontaines** (2; p185), named for its 40 fountains burbling around town (Pernes' tourist office can provide a map to ferret them out). A further 11km south, canals ploughed by giant wooden water wheels completely surround the island-town of **L'Isle-sur-la-Sorgue** (3; p186). Take a gentle 1km stroll to the **partage des eaux** ('parting of the waters'; p186) where the River Sorgue splits in two, and where there are quaint cafés to stop for morning tea. Should you want to sleep down by the riverside, 5km west of L'Isle in the enchanting village of Le Thor, is **Moulin Font de Capelle** (p186), an old restored mill with its own dock.

The source of the Sorgue lies 7km east of L'Isle in **Fontaine de Vaucluse** (4; p187), France's most powerful spring, which is spectacular after rainfall. For a day trip within a day trip, bus up to Fontaine then **canoe** (p188) the crystalline waters back to L'Isle, where you'll find idyllic restaurants right on the water and ideal for lunch, including the impossibly charming **La Prévôté** (p186). Afterwards, make your way from Fontaine or L'Isle to the hilltop village of **Venasque** (5; p188), before spending the rest of the afternoon exploring the wild, rugged **Gorges de la Nesque** (6; p188). Back in Carpentras, unwind with a dip in its 1930 geometric **Art Deco swimming pool** (p184).



AVIGNON & AROUND

At the heart of the Avignon Area is the city itself. Across the river, villagelike Villeneuve-lès-Avignon offers respite from the city's bustle.

AVIGNON

pop 88,312

Hooped by 4.3km of superbly preserved stone ramparts, this graceful city is the belle of Provence's ball. Its time as the papal seat of power bestowed on Avignon 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 donned 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. From 1309 to 1377, the seven French-born popes invested huge sums of money in building and decorating the papal palace in Avignon. 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

LITERARY AVIGNON

Discover the Avignon area through literary eyes:

- *The Avignon Quintet* (Lawrence Durrell) This one-volume, 1367-page edition of five Durrell novels, written between 1974 and 1985, kicks off on a south-bound train to Avignon.
- *Cesar's Vast Ghosts: Aspects of Provence* (Lawrence Durrell) Philosophical reflections on Provençal history and culture, published days before the author's death at his home in Somières, near Nîmes.
- *Letters from my Windmill* (Alphonse Daudet) Masterpiece evoking 1860s Fontvieille. Daudet's *Tartarin of Tarascon* is also in print in English.
- *The Red Cockade* (Stanley John Weyman) First published in 1896 and set in part against a backdrop of Nîmes, in the swashbuckling tradition of Dumas.

after the schism was settled and an imperial pope, Martin V, established himself in Rome, Avignon remained under papal rule; and 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, north it's rue de la République.

MARKET DAY

For porcine products in all their manifestations, along with a staggering array of fresh produce. Outdoor markets generally set up from around 8am to noon. Covered food markets in Avignon (p166) and Nîmes (p199) operate daily.

Monday Fontvieille

Tuesday Beaumes-des-Venise, Maussane-les-Alpilles, Tarascon, Vaison-la-Romaine

Wednesday Malaucène, Sault, St-Rémy de Provence, Valréas

Thursday Eyrargues, L'Isle-sur-la-Sorgue, Maillane, Nyons, Orange, Vaison-la-Romaine, Villeneuve-lès-Avignon

Friday Carpentras, Châteauneuf du Pape, Fontvieille, Graveson (farmers' market; 4pm to 8pm May to October)

Saturday Orange (June to September), Pernes-les-Fontaines, Richerenches (truffles; November to March), Vaison-la-Romaine

Sunday L'Isle-sur-la-Sorgue, Vaison-la-Romaine (July and August)

The café-clad central square, place de l'Horloge, is 300m south of place du Palais, which abuts the Palais des Papes. The city gate nearest the train station is called 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), which is centred on rue des Teinturiers, southeast of place Pie, is Avignon's bohemian artists' hang-out.

Villeneuve-lès-Avignon and Les Angles are adjacent suburbs on the west bank of the River Rhône, and are reached by crossing the two branches of the river as well as Île de la Barthelasse, the island that divides them.

Information

BOOKSHOPS

The tourist office (opposite) has a small boutique (open April to October) that sells maps and regional guides in French and English.

Shakespeare (☎ 04 90 27 38 50; 155 rue de la Carreterie; ☎ 9.30am-12.30pm & 2-6.30pm Tue-Sat) Enjoy scones with your tomes at this English bookshop-tearoom.

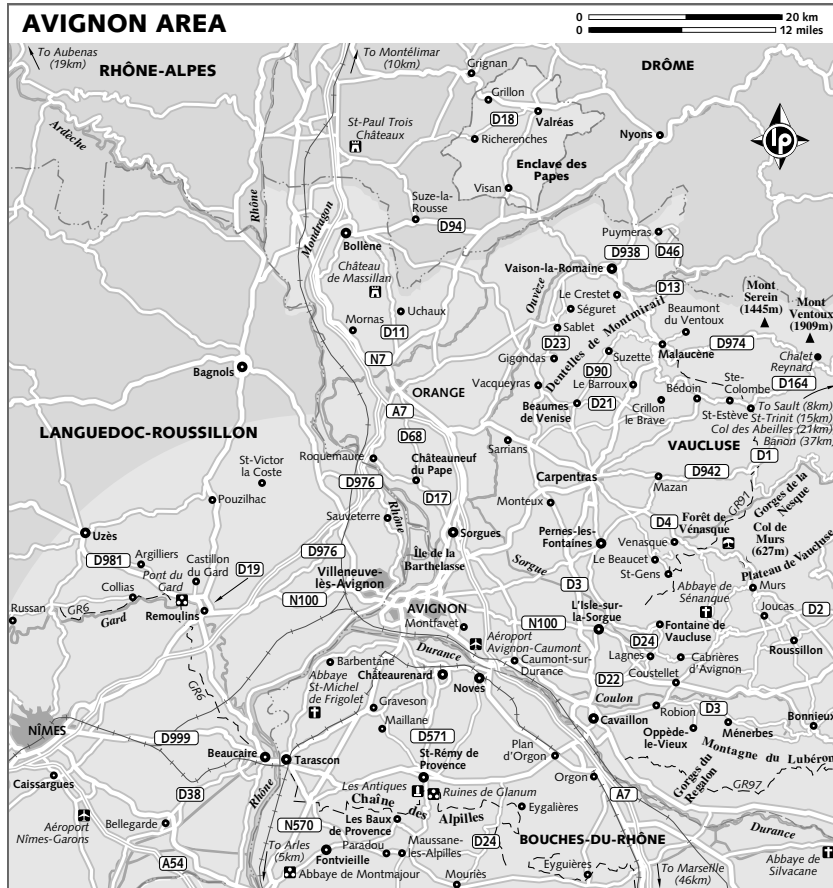
EMERGENCY

Police station (☎ 04 90 16 81 00; blvd St-Roch)

INTERNET ACCESS

There are internet cafés around place Pie.

Chez W@M (☎ 04 90 86 19 03; www.chezwam.fr in French; 41 rue du Vieux Sextier; per 15/60min €1/3.50; ☎ 8am-midnight Mon-Fri, noon-midnight Sat & Sun)



UNDER THE BRIDGE

This author doesn't quite remember dancing on Avignon's broken bridge as a pinafored four-year-old, but family snaps show that she did. The bridge continues to capture kids' imaginations everywhere with its namesake nursery rhyme, 'Sur le Pont d'Avignon'. All together now:

*Sur le pont d'Avignon
L'on y danse, l'on y danse
Sur le pont d'Avignon
L'on y danse tout en rond...*

*(On the bridge of Avignon
Everyone is dancing, everyone is dancing
On the bridge of Avignon
Everyone is dancing in a circle...)*

And so on. But actually, apart from rhyming better in French, because the bridge was too narrow for dancing (much less in a circle), people are believed to have danced *sous* (under) its arches, where it straddled the island Île de la Barthelasse. Previously pleasure gardens hosting folk dancing, the island is another prime spot for a bridge panorama today.

The 16th-century composer Pierre Certon penned the original song, albeit to a different tune, under the title of 'Sus le Pont d'Avignon'. In the mid-19th century, Adolphe Adam featured the present-day version in the 1853 operetta *L'Auberge Pleine*, but it wasn't until it was popularised in 1876 that it was inverted.

The alleged inspiration for the now Unesco-listed bridge is an even older tale. Construction is said to have begun in 1177 when Bénézet (Benedict the Bridge Builder), a pastor from Ardèche, was told in three visions to span the Rhône at any cost.

Regardless of the song's or bridge's origins, chances are you'll see kids (and maybe a Lonely Planet author) doing a jig on the bridge for posterity.

Webzone (☎ 04 32 76 29 47; 3 rue St Jean le Vieux; per 30/60min €2/3.50; ☎ 10am-10pm)

INTERNET RESOURCES

Avignon & Provence (www.avignon-et-provence.com)

Sleeping and eating options in Avignon and Provence.

Provence Guide (www.provenceguide.com) Covers the

Vaucluse region including B&Bs.

Visit Provence (www.visitprovence.com)

LAUNDRY

Laverie la Fontaine (27 rue du Portail Magnanen; ☎ 7am-7.30pm)

MEDICAL SERVICES

Hôpital Général Henri Duffaut (☎ 04 32 75 33 33; 305 rue Raoul Follereau) Marked on maps as Hôpital Sud (bus 1 or 3 to end of line); 2.5km south of the central train station.

MONEY

CIC is in the train station forecourt with a currency-changing machine and ATM.

POST

Main post office (cours Président Kennedy)

TOURIST INFORMATION

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

Sights

Ticket offices for most sights close half to one hour before overall closing times.

PONT ST-BÉNÉZET (PONT D'AVIGNON)

The fabled **Pont St-Bénézet** (St Bénézet's Bridge; ☎ 04 90 27 51 16; full price/pass €4/3.30; ☎ 9am-9pm Jul, 9am-8pm Aug-Sep, 9am-7pm mid-Mar-Oct, 9.30am-5.45pm Nov-mid-Mar) was completed in 1185, linking Avignon with the settlement across the Rhône that later became Villeneuve-lès-Avignon (see the boxed text, above). 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.

At the entrance, via cours Châtelet, is the new **Musée du Pont St-Bénézet** (admission incl in bridge entry) where you can make your own DVD of



AVIGNON AREA

AVIGNON

AVIGNON AREA

INFORMATION		Université d'Avignon.....	28 F2	Tapalocas.....	58 C2
Banque de Lyonnais.....	1 C2	Verger d'Urbain V.....	29 D1	Woolloomooloo.....	59 E3
Chef W@M.....	2 D2				
CIC.....	(see 84)	SLEEPING		ENTERTAINMENT	
Laverie la Fontaine.....	3 D3	Auberge Bagatelle.....	30 A1	AJMI.....	(see 61)
Main Post Office.....	4 C4	Cloître St-Louis.....	31 C4	Cinéma Utopia.....	(see 61)
Police Station.....	5 C4	Hôtel Boquier.....	32 C4	FNAC.....	60 C2
Shakespeare.....	6 E1	Hôtel de Blauvac.....	33 C2	La Manutention.....	61 D1
Tourist Office.....	7 C3	Hôtel de Garlande.....	34 C2	L'Esclave.....	62 C1
Webzone.....	8 D2	Hôtel de la Mirande.....	35 D2	Opéra Théâtre d'Avignon.....	63 C2
		Hôtel de l'Horloge.....	36 C2	Red Lion.....	64 D2
		Hôtel du Palais des Papes.....	37 C2	Red Zone.....	65 D2
SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES		Hôtel Le Provençal.....	38 C2	Théâtre du Bourg Neuf.....	66 D3
Autocars Lieutaud.....	(see 74)	Hôtel L'Europe.....	39 C2	Théâtre du Chêne Noir.....	67 D2
Bureau du Festival.....	(see 31)	Hôtel Mignon.....	40 C2	Théâtre du Chien qui Fume.....	68 E3
Bureau du Off.....	9 C1	Cathédrale Notre Dame des Doms.....	10 C1		
Bureau du Off.....	9 C1	Chapelle des Pénitents Gris.....	11 E3	SHOPPING	
Cathédrale Notre Dame des Doms.....	10 C1	Collection Lambert.....	12 C3	Comtesse du Barry.....	69 C2
Les Grands Bateaux de Provence.....	14 B2	Couvent des Cordeliers.....	13 D3	Covered Mall.....	70 C2
Les Trains Touristiques d'Avignon.....	15 C1	Les Grands Bateaux de Provence.....	14 B2	Instant du Sud.....	71 C2
Maison des Vins.....	16 C3	Les Trains Touristiques d'Avignon.....	15 C1	Oliviers & Co.....	72 C2
Musée Angladon.....	17 C3	Maison des Vins.....	16 C3		
Musée Calvet.....	18 C3	Musée Angladon.....	17 C3	TRANSPORT	
Musée du Petit Palais.....	19 C1	Musée Calvet.....	18 C3	Agence Commerciale TCRA.....	73 C4
Musée du Pont St-Bénézet.....	20 C1	Musée du Petit Palais.....	19 C1	Avis.....	(see 75)
Musée Lapidaire.....	21 C3	Musée du Pont St-Bénézet.....	20 C1	Bus Station.....	74 D4
Palais des Papes.....	22 C2	Musée Lapidaire.....	21 C3	Europcar.....	75 C4
Place du Palais.....	23 C1	Palais des Papes.....	22 C2	La Barthelasse Bus Stop.....	76 A1
Pont St-Bénézet.....	24 C1	Place du Palais.....	23 C1	National Citer.....	77 A1
Pont St-Bénézet Entrance.....	(see 24)	Pont St-Bénézet.....	24 C1	Parking de L'île Piot.....	78 A1
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Synagogue.....	26 D2	Porte St-Lazare.....	25 F1	Shuttle Boat Embarkment Point.....	80 C1
Trompe l'Œil Painting of Popes.....	27 C2	Synagogue.....	26 D2	Shuttlebuses to/from Gare TGV.....	81 C4
		Trompe l'Œil Painting of Popes.....	27 C2	TCRA Office.....	82 D2
				Vinci Park Gare Centre.....	83 C4

the song. Dreamy (if distant) bridge views unfold from the Rocher des Doms, Pont Édouard Daladier and across the river on the Île de la Barthelasse.

WALLED CITY

Wrapping around the city, Avignon's ramparts were built between 1359 and 1370. 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 like pouring boiling oil on attackers or shooting arrows at them).

To peek at Avignon's nine popes in their fashionable garbs of the day, seek out their **trompe l'œil portrait** on the side of the *conseil général* (general council) building, off rue Viala.

Université d'Avignon (Avignon University; www.univ-avignon.fr; 74 rue Louis Pasteur), founded by Pope Boniface VIII in 1303, resides in all its splendour inside **Porte St-Lazare**, the gate linking the eastern part of the walled city with the modern world.

Within the walls is a wealth of fine museums – the Avignon Passion booklet (see the boxed text, p162) lists the whole gamut.

Palais des Papes

Flanked by the sprawling courtyard cour d'Honneur, the **Palais des Papes** (Palace of the Popes; ☎ 04 90 27 50 00; place du Palais; full price/pass €9.50/7.50; 🕒 9am-9pm Jul, 9am-8pm Aug & Sep, 9am-7pm mid-Mar–Oct, 9.30am-5.45pm Nov–mid-Mar) is the largest Gothic palace in the world. Its cavernous stone halls and extensive grounds testify to the fortune amassed by the papacy during the 'Babylonian Captivity'. Papal banquets held here were of fitting proportions. A feast to celebrate Clement VI's coronation in 1342 included 118 oxen, 1033 spit-roasted sheep, 1195 geese, 7428 chickens, 50,000 sweet tarts, 39,980 eggs and 95,000 loaves of bread.

Palace admission includes an audioguide to direct you around 24 of the halls; the **Grande Chapelle** (Great Chapel), where temporary exhibitions are held; the **Musée de l'Oeuvre**, with its interactive maquettes, archaeological pieces, statues and other works illustrating medieval

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 your 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 good for 15 days in all the museums of Avignon as well as Villeneuve-lès-Avignon, and covers a family of five.

papal life; and a stroll around the wine boutique **La Bouteillerie**.

A two-hour **Visite Palais Secrét** (secret palace tour; French only; tours €30; ☎ by reservation Sat & Sun Sep-May) takes you to unexplored parts of the palace (the baths, bedrooms where the popes kept caged nightingales, secret towers, rooftop walkways etc), followed by brunch (and a stunning panorama) on the **Great Dignitaries' Terrace**.

Combination tickets covering admission to the palace and Pont St-Bénézet (adult/eight to 17 years March to October €11.50/9, November to mid-March €9.50/7.50) are available.

Place du Palais

In the 14th and 15th centuries bishops and archbishops lived in the sizable **Petit Palace** (Little Palace; place du Palais). Today the **Musée du Petit Palais** (☎ 04 90 86 44 58; musee.petitpalais@wanadoo.fr; place du Palais; adult/under 12yr €6/free; ☎ 10am-1pm & 2-6pm Wed-Mon-Jun-Sep, 9.30am-1pm & 2-5.30pm Wed-Mon Oct-May), it houses a collection of 13th- to 16th-century Italian religious paintings from artists including Botticelli, Carpaccio and Giovanni di Paolo.

From the Romanesque **Cathédrale Notre Dame des Doms** (1671-72), the **Promenade des Papes** (signposted along rue de Mons) leads to the **Verger d'Urbain V** gardens – since gravelled over – where the popes grew plants and herbs and kept exotic animals in cages.

Musée Calvet

Impressive architecture and art intertwine at the 18th-century mansion housing the **Musée Calvet** (☎ 04 90 86 33 84; 65 rue Joseph Vernet; full price/pass €6/3; ☎ 10am-1pm & 2-6pm Wed-Mon). Collections include 15th-century wrought-iron works and paintings from the 16th to 20th centuries.

Musée Lapidaire

Museum buffs on a budget will like the **Musée Lapidaire** (☎ 04 90 86 33 84; 27 rue de la République; full price/pass €2/1; ☎ 10am-1pm & 2-6pm Wed-Mon), with an interesting collection of Egyptian, Roman, Etruscan and early Christian pieces ranging from large sections of statuary and hieroglyphics to delicate vases and bronze figurines.

Musée Angladon

From the private collection of couturier Jacques Doucet (1853-1929), the charming **Musée Angladon** (☎ 04 90 82 29 03; www.angladon.com; 5 rue Laboureur; full price/pass €6/4; ☎ 1-6pm Wed-Sun Sep-Jun) holds the only Van Gogh painting in Provence, *Railway Wagons*. If you look closely you'll see the 'earth' isn't paint but the bare, underlying canvas. Also housed in this gracious mansion are works by Picasso, Cézanne, Sisley, Manet, Degas and others, and antiques upstairs.

Collection Lambert

Avignon's contemporary art museum, **Collection Lambert** (☎ 04 90 16 56 20; www.collectionlambert.com; 5 rue Violette; adult/under 18yr €5.50/4; ☎ 11am-6pm Tue-Sun Aug-Jun, 11am-7pm Tue-Sun Jul), showcases photography, video, and minimalist, conceptual and land art from the 1960s and '70s.

Quartier des Teinturiers

Rue des Teinturiers follows the River Sorgue through Avignon's old dyers' district, busy til the 19th century. Some water wheels still turn. Beneath plane trees stands the 16th-century **Chapelle des Pénitents Gris** (rue des Teinturiers) and the chapel and bell tower of the former **Couvent des Cordeliers** (rue des Teinturiers), Avignon's largest convent when it was founded in 1226. Inside lies the grave of Laura, muse of the poet Petrarch.

Synagogue

Avignon's neoclassical **synagogue** (☎ 04 90 85 21 24; 2 place Jérusalem; ☎ 10am-noon & 3-5pm Mon-Thu, 10am-noon Fri) was built in 1221. A 13th-century oven used to bake unleavened bread for Passover can still be seen, but the rest of the present round, domed neoclassical structure dates from 1846; a fire destroyed the original edifice in 1845. Visitors must be modestly dressed and men's heads must be covered, as is the custom.

Activities**BOATING**

Les Grands Bateaux de Provence (☎ 04 90 85 62 25; www.avignon-et-provence.com/mireio; allées de l'Oulle), based at the landing stage opposite Porte de l'Oulle, runs cruises along the River Rhône from Avignon to Arles and Châteauneuf du Pape (both four to seven hours) including lunch prepared by an on-board chef year-round (from €44), with children's menus available. In summer you can enjoy a candlelight dinner (adult/under 12 years €23.50/12) aboard, or make a return trip (adult/under 12 years €7/3.50, one hour, six daily, mid-June to mid-September) on the company's boat-bus around Île de la Barthelasse.

Avignon Passion pass holders get discounts.

INLINE SKATING

Avignon en Rollers (www.avignonrollers.asso.fr in French) meets for a weekly blade (7km to 10km, one hour) on Friday at 8.30pm in front of the main post office (see p159), and also arranges longer trips into the surrounding countryside.

WINE TASTING

The **Maison des Vins** (☎ 04 90 27 24 00; www.vins-rhone.com; 6 rue des Trois Faucons) doesn't have in-house tastings, but it does hand out a series of free booklets, detailing nine different colour-coded *routes touristiques* (tourist trails) in the Côtes du Rhône wine region, and lists dozens of estates where you can taste, buy, eat, drink, be merry and sleep.

Within the Palais des Papes (opposite) you can pay for tastings and buy Côtes du Rhône wines at cellar-door prices.

Avignon for Children

Trundling a 40-minute circuit around town, the little tourist trains **Les Trains Touristiques d'Avignon** (☎ 06 11 35 06 66; place du Palais; tickets €7; ☎ mid-Jun-mid-Oct) are a winner with kids and adults alike.

A playground is situated in the hilltop gardens **Jardins des Doms** (see also p166). Avignon's **tourist office** (☎ 04 32 74 32 74; www.avignon-tourisme.com; 41 cours Jean Jaurès) often runs family-oriented **guided tours** in English and French.

Across the river in Les Angles, planets loom large at the **Parc d'Astronomie, du Soleil et du Cosmos** (☎ 04 90 25 62 82; www.parducocosmos.net in French; av Charles de Gaulle), an astronomy park where young masterminds can follow a 1½-hour trail through garrigue to unravel the mysteries of the universe. Call ahead to check what workshops/guided visits it has that day.

Tours

The **tourist office** (☎ 04 32 74 32 74; www.avignon-tourisme.com; 41 cours Jean Jaurès) runs several city tours, including English-language ones on foot. These thematic tours regularly change, but include highlights such as Avignon l'Italienne (Italian Avignon), which departs from the tourist office at 10am Thursday and Saturday April to October (adult €10, child under eight years €7); and Avignon at the time of the Popes (including a tour of the Palais des Papes), departing from the tourist office at 10am Tuesday and Friday from April to October (adult/child €15/7). From November to March, a city tour in English and French departs at 10am on Saturday.

Autocars Lieutaud (☎ 04 90 86 36 75; www.cars-lieutaud.fr), based at the bus station, runs thematic half- and full-day bus tours throughout the Vaucluse between April and October.

Festivals & Events

More than 600 *spectacles* take to the stage and streets during Avignon's **Festival d'Avignon** (Bureau du Festival; ☎ 04 90 27 66 50; www.festival-avignon.com; Espace St-Louis, 20 rue du Portail Boquier), founded in 1946 and held every year from early July to early August. Tickets for official festival performances in the Palais des Papes' cour d'Honneur cost around €30; reservations can be made from mid-June.

Paralleling the official festival, the fringe event, **Festival Off** (Avignon Public Off; ☎ 04 90 25 24 30; www.avignon-off.org), has an eclectic – and cheaper – programme of experimental performances. A Carte Public Adhèrent (€14) gives you a 30% discount on all Festival Off performances.

Tickets for both festivals are also available from FNAC branches. The tourist office has annual ticket information.

Toast the first Côtes du Rhône wines of the year at the **Fête des Côtes du Rhône Primeurs** in mid-November.

Sleeping

Finding a room during the Festival d'Avignon is all but impossible unless you've reserved months ahead. Many places close for a few weeks midwinter.

CHAMBRES D'HÔTES

Avignon's *chambres d'hôtes* are becoming something of a key attraction in their own right.

La Péniche (☎ 04 90 25 40 61; www.avignon-et-provence.com/location-peniche/la-peniche; d incl breakfast from €60; ☎) Be rocked to sleep by the gentle

River Rhône aboard Avignon's most unique *chambre d'hôte*. Permanently moored just outside the ramparts, this 1956 houseboat gleams with polished solid timber cabinetry, and incorporates a small self-catering kitchen. Free bikes are available for a spin around the city or Île de la Barthelasse.

Lumani (☎ 04 90 82 94 11; www.avignon-lumani.com; 37 rue du Rempart St-Lazare; d incl breakfast €85-150; ☒ ☑) This fabulous *maison d'hôte* run by Elisabeth, whose artworks are hung throughout the stunning house, and her husband, Jean, a saxophonist, is a fount of inspiration for artists. Lumani's stone walls house five rooms (including two suites) and a soundproofed music atelier overlooking a fountained garden. Elisabeth and Jean offer a table d'hôte (set meal; €25; minimum four people). An adjacent artists' workshop is available for rent. Wi-fi is free.

Le Limas (☎ 04 90 14 67 19; www.le-limas-avignon.com; 51 rue du Limas; incl breakfast d €86-135, tr €139-165; ☒ ☑) Behind its discreet (easily missed) entrance in a quiet side street 50m from the papal palace, this chic *chambre d'hôte* in an 18th-century mansion looks like it's been lifted from the pages of *Vogue Living*, with four white-on-white rooms with hardwood floors. Breakfast on homemade jam by the cosy fireplace or on the sun-drenched terrace.

La Bastide des Papes (☎ 04 90 86 09 42; www.bastide-despapes.com; 352 chemin des Poiriers, Île de la Barthelasse; d incl breakfast €90-115; ☒ ☑ ☒ ☑) A five-minute drive from the hurdy-gurdy of Avignon and a quick flit across the river to Villeneuve, on the Île de la Barthelasse, the only sounds from this restored retreat's exquisitely decorated, airy rooms are the birds chirping in the century-old trees. A sumptuous breakfast is served pool-side, there's a farm-style self-catering kitchen, and you can ride the *bastide's* bikes around the little-trafficked island. Parking is free.

Villa Agapé (☎ 04 90 85 21 92; www.villa-agape.com; 13 rue St-Agricol; d incl breakfast €90-140; ☒ closed during Festival d'Avignon; ☒ ☑ ☒) Wrapped around a swimming pool in central Avignon, this sophisticated townhouse has a deep crimson lounge room lined with bookshelves and three delightful rooms. Two are named after multilingual host Mme de La Pommeraye's grown-up daughters, Caroline and Olivia, whose rooms they once were; and one, large enough to accommodate a family, opens to a sunny private terrace. Agapé's entrance is the inconspicuous wooden door next to the pharmacy.

HOTELS Budget

Hôtel Mignon (☎ 04 90 82 17 30; www.hotel-mignon.com; 12 rue Joseph Vernet; s €36, d €40-55; ☒ ☑) Cute and comfy, this 16-room place within the walled city is a favourite for its boutique rooms in a palette of Provençal colours like lavender, its friendly, helpful staff, wi-fi, and a decent breakfast of croissants and rolls (€5).

Hôtel le Provençal (☎ 04 90 85 25 24; www.hotel-provençal.com; 13 rue Joseph Vernet; s €41.15-60.15, d €43.30-60.30) In the northeastern corner of the walled city centre, 11 rooms painted the colour of sunshine are clean, cosy and welcoming, and all are equipped with telephones and TVs.

Hôtel Boquier (☎ 04 90 82 34 43; www.hotel-boquier.com; 6 rue du Portail Boquier; d €45-62) Handy for the train and bus stations, this 18th-century manor's attractive rooms are inspired by destinations like India and southern Africa. A wrought-iron gate opens to a 'café' (for guests only), with wood-beamed ceilings, serving breakfast (€7).

The Auberge Bagatelle (opposite) also has hotel rooms.

Midrange

Hôtel de Blauvac (☎ 04 90 86 34 11; www.hotel-blauvac.com; 11 rue de la Bancasse; s €52-72, d €57-87, tr €72-97) This graceful, twin-starred hotel was the town residence of the Marquis de Blauvac in the 17th century. Today it houses 16 individually adorned rooms (some with lofts) with sparkling contemporary bathrooms and exposed stone walls. Staff are a fount of information for your Avignon explorations.

Hôtel du Palais des Papes (☎ 04 90 86 04 13; www.hotel-avignon.com; 1 rue Gérard Philippe; d €65-75; menus €25-50) It's not taking the Palais' name in vain: this might be an old-fashioned abode with wrought-iron furniture, frescoed ceilings and exposed stone walls, but the pricier rooms indeed sport a view of the Palais des Papes opposite. There's also a wonderfully authentic, cave-like restaurant, Le Lutrin.

Hôtel de Garlande (☎ 04 90 80 08 85; www.hotel-garlande.com; 20 rue Galante; d €70-110; ☒ ☑ ☑) Central for just about everything including the bus and train stations, the Hôtel de Garlande is a sweet, familial, 12-room place housed in a historic *hôtel particulier* (private mansion) overlooking a narrow street in the city's heart.

Hôtel de l'Horloge (☎ 04 90 16 42 00; www.hotels-ochre-azur.com; place de l'Horloge; s €72-122, d €82-132; ☒ ☑) On Avignon's main square, refined rooms are decorated in natural fabrics and fibres, with

muslin curtains overlaid by stone-coloured checked linen drapes and lustrous chocolate-brown carpet. Even the sprayed concrete interiors manage to look stylish as well thanks to smart two-toned colour schemes. Breakfast (€13) is an impressive buffet banquet.

Top End

Cloître St-Louis (☎ 04 90 27 55 55; www.cloitre-saint-louis.com; 20 rue du Portail Boquier; d €100-170; ☒ ☒ ☒ ☒ ☑) This four-star hotel's 80 rooms are housed in a Jesuit school dating from 1589, as well as a contemporary wing with a rooftop pool designed by French architect Jean Nouvel. Most look over the namesake cloister, with some peering out to the private garden. Parking is free during the winter, and costs €10 in the busier months and €15 during the festival.

Hôtel L'Europe (☎ 04 90 14 76 76; www.heurope.com; 12 place Crillon; d €141-449; ☒ ☒) You're in good company at this antique-laden, 1799-established hotel: illustrious guests have included Napoleon, King Edward VII of England, Charles Dickens, Jackie Kennedy-Onassis and Jacques Chirac. All 44 rooms are befittingly resplendent, subtly incorporating mod cons including English and Japanese TV channels, with free wi-fi in about half the rooms. Gourmands can dine at chef Bruno d'Angelis' Michelin-starred restaurant (open Tuesday to Saturday for lunch and dinner).

Hôtel de la Mirande (☎ 04 90 14 20 22; www.la-mirande.fr; 4 place de la Mirande; d €295-475, ste from €570; ☒ ☒ ☒ ☒) In a 14th-century cardinal's palace behind Palais des Papes, this exclusive hotel has rooms decorated to reflect the tapestries adorning its walls. Its restaurant (*menus* €34 to €105) is praiseworthy and innovative, and it's also home to the renowned cooking school, Le Marmiton. On Tuesday and Wednesday at 8pm, a table d'hôte (€85) is served in the 19th-century kitchen. Set around a pretty interior courtyard patio, a continental breakfast costs €24 (€29 for a buffet), and parking costs an even more impressive €22 per night.

HOSTEL & CAMPING

Auberge Bagatelle (☎ 04 90 85 78 45; auberge.bagatelle@wanadoo.fr; Île de la Barthelasse; dm €14.56, s €28.90-32.90, d €34.80-36.80; ☑) Just north of Pont Édouard Daladier on Île de la Barthelasse, 850m from the walled city, this hostel has 180 beds in a mix of two- to eight-bed rooms, plus snazzier private digs including family rooms in

its adjoining hotel. All rates include breakfast; sheets are €2.50. Take bus 10 from the main post office to the La Barthelasse stop, then follow the river where you'll see the adjacent camping ground (camping €8.92 to €15.32).

Eating

RESTAURANTS

Place de l'Horloge is a riot of restaurants and cafés from Easter until mid-November. They're popular with tourists, but generally ambient and decent value. Most menus start at around €16.

Several hotels (opposite) have superb restaurants open to guests and nonguests.

Restaurant Brunel (☎ 04 90 27 16 00; 46 rue de la Balance; mains €10-18; ☒) lunch & dinner Tue-Sat) Brunel is a local favourite for authentic Provençal dishes such as aioli (see p46), especially at lunch, when there are outstanding deals on main courses (which always include a fish of the day) and desserts. The handful of outdoor tables is hotly contested in warm weather.

Le Caveau du Théâtre (☎ 04 90 82 60 91; 16 rue des Trois Faucons; lunch/dinner menus €10.60/18; ☒ closed Sat lunch & Sun) Swing over to the south of the square for mellow, moody jazz and a monthly changing *carte* (menu) of traditional southern French fare with extra zip, such as butter-fried fish in a curry paste with sun-dried tomatoes.

Número 75 (☎ 04 90 27 16 00; 75 rue Guillaume Puy; menus from €16, mains from €10; ☒ lunch & dinner Mon-Sat, daily during Festival d'Avignon) This place in a lovely old house (where, incidentally, Pernod was concocted in 1870 by absinthe inventor Jules Pernod while he was living here) is now one of Avignon's in-spots for Mediterranean cuisine with succulent flavours like mango, and a fantastic €16 'chef's suggestion' menu.

Le Grand Café (☎ 04 90 27 04 96; 4 rue des Escaliers Ste-Anne; lunch/dinner menus from €18/30, mains from €13; ☒ lunch & dinner Tue-Sat, daily Jul) Within the arty Mauntenition cultural centre (p167), the duck breast/mushroom tart fare at Le Grand Café is endorsed by locals as 'almost gastronomic' (ie delectable but affordable).

La Fourchette (☎ 04 90 85 20 93; 17 rue Racine; menus from €28; ☒ lunch & dinner Mon-Fri) An enduring classical French bistro west of place de l'Horloge run by the same family for generations, La Fourchette offers a tempting choice of dishes on its fixed-price menu (prices are the same for lunch or dinner). Along with tender lamb, specialities include marinated sardines, and a sinful meringue ice cream with praline.

Le Moutardier (☎ 04 90 85 34 76; moutardier@wanadoo.fr; 15 place du Palais; menus €28-50; ☺ lunch & dinner, closed early-late Jan) In the medieval days of the Avignon popes, the *souffleur* blew the fire to get it going, the *rôtisseur* roasted the meat on it and the *moutardier* made the mustard – hence the name of this traditional restaurant lazing in the shade of the Palais des Papes with sweeping views from its terrace.

Christian Étienne (☎ 04 90 86 16 50; 10 rue de Mons; lunch menu €30, dinner menus €55-105; ☺ lunch & dinner Tue-Sat, daily Jul) Extending from an elevated dining room to a leafy outdoor terrace in a 12th-century palace neighbouring the Palais des Papes, this is Avignon's top table. Seasonally varying signature specialties such as Avignonnaise wild boar stew, tomatoes prepared in an inordinate amount of ways, and truffle ice cream are created by its eponymous master chef.

SELF-CATERING

Pack a picnic basket from the 40-plus outlets filling Les Halles' **food market** (place Pie; ☺ 7am-1pm Tue-Sun); freshly baked breads, pastries and filled baguettes from **Erio Convert** (45 cours Jean Jaurès) and St-Tropez's famous cream-and-cake concoction at **La Tropicienne** (☎ 04 90 86 24 72; 22 rue St-Agricol; ☺ 8.30am-7.30pm Mon-Sat). Then make your way to Avignon's picturesque picnic spot, **Rocher des Doms**, a blufftop park with views spanning the Rhône, Pont St-Bénézet, Villeneuve-lès-Avignon and the Alpilles. Finish off with a *papaline d'Avignon*, a pink chocolate ball of potent Mont Ventoux herbal liqueur that packs a punch; it's available from speciality sweet shops in town such as **La Cure Gourmande** (☎ 04 90 82 65 35; 24 rue des Marchands; ☺ 10am-7pm daily).

Drinking

Tapalocas (☎ 04 90 82 56 84; 15 rue Galante; tapas from €2.50; ☺ 11.45am-1am) Tuck into an endless array of Spanish tapas over a sangria or two at this vivacious place in the pedestrian area.

La Compagnie des Comptoirs (☎ 04 90 85 99 04; 83 rue Joseph Vernet; mains €25-29; ☺ doors close 1am) Also incorporating a snazzy restaurant wrapped around an 18th-century courtyard. Sink back on raised Moroccan-style beds beneath the arches of this former convent cloister. On weekends, cutting-edge DJs mix it up.

L'Opéra Café (☎ 04 90 86 17 43; 24 place de l'Horloge; lunch formule/plat du jour €13/9, menu €32; ☺ 10am-1.30am) DJs keep the beats coming at this contemporary café with a thespian bent on central place de l'Horloge. Open for lunch and dinner.

Woolloomooloo (☎ 04 90 85 28 44; 16bis rue des Teinturiers; menus from €15; ☺ to 10.30pm winter, to 11.30pm summer) Inspired by the Australian bush, this eclectic Avignon institution, in a former printing house adjoining an old paper mill, embraces timber, antiques and a down-to-earth, authentic air that extends to its vegetarian-leaning menu. Get into to the spirit with a glass of the house speciality, Ti-Punch, packing Caribbean rum, lime juice, candied fruits, and spice-infused syrup.

L'Echappée Belle (☎ 04 90 82 52 61; 13 rue de la Balance; mains €14; ☺ noon-10pm) For flavours of cumin, saffron and ginger infusing regional produce, or for a homemade pastry and tea, Avignon's newest restaurant/tearoom is a treat. Named after the Nicolas Bouvier novel of the same name (which translates as 'the beautiful escape'), it's a chic yet relaxed spot amid Avignon's architectural and artistic highlights.

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** (☎ 04 90 14 35 35; 19 rue de la République; ☺ 10am-7pm Mon-Sat); the tourist office also sells tickets for many cultural fixtures.

NIGHTCLUBS & LIVE MUSIC

Avignon's entertainment scene tends to revolve more around its cultural offerings rather than party-hard nightlife, but there are some perennial favourites for a pint.

Red Lion (☎ 04 90 86 40 25; 21-23 rue St-Jean le Vieux; ☺ 8am-1am) Looking like someone picked it up from central London and plonked it down in Avignon, this cherry red English pub has gigs a couple of nights a week, and theme nights a couple of times a month.

Red Zone (☎ 04 90 27 02 44; 25 rue Carnot) A studenty crowd gathers here for its regular gigs and always-buzzing bar that's open late.

L'Esclave (☎ 04 90 85 14 91; 12 rue du Limas; ☺ from 11pm Tue-Sun) Avignon's inner-city gay hot spot is tucked behind a blank backstreet façade.

CLASSICAL MUSIC, OPERA, BALLET & THEATRE

The season at the **Opéra Théâtre d'Avignon** (☎ 04 90 82 81 40; place de l'Horloge), built in 1847, runs October to June, presenting operas, operettas, plays, symphonic concerts, chamber-music concerts and ballet.

There are dozens of theatres, among them the mainstream **Théâtre du Bourg Neuf** (☎ 04 90 85 17 90; bourgneuf@wandoo.fr; 5bis rue du Bourg-Neuf) and **Théâtre du Chêne Noir** (☎ 04 90 86 58 11; www.theatreduchene noir.asso.fr in French; 8bis rue Ste-Catherine). The **Théâtre du Chien qui Fume** (The Dog who Smokes; ☎ 04 90 85 89 49; www.chienquifume.com in French; 76 rue des Teinturiers) is an alternative venue in the dyers' district.

JAZZ

AJMI (Association pour Le Jazz & La Musique Improvisée; ☎ 04 90 86 08 61; www.jazzalajmi.com in French; 4 rue des Escaliers Ste-Anne) This a popular jazz club is inside the arts centre, La Manutention. Concert tickets cost around €15.

CINEMA

Cinéma Utopia (☎ 04 90 82 65 36; www.cinemas-utopia.org in French; 4 rue des Escaliers Ste-Anne; tickets day/evening €3.50/5.50) Catch nondubbed films, both classic and contemporary at Utopia, inside the La Manutention building.

Shopping

Place des Carmes buzzes with a flower market on Saturday and a flea market on Sunday. Avignon's smartest shopping streets are rue St-Agricol and rue Joseph Vernet, southwest of place de l'Horloge. Find art and antique galleries on rue du Limas and inside the **covered mall** (23 rue St-Agricol) beneath Hôtel du Petit Louvre. **Comtesse du Barry** (☎ 04 90 82 62 92; 25 rue St-Agricol) Stock up on gourmet goodies like fine wine and foie gras. **Instant du Sud** (☎ 04 90 82 24 48; 1 place Nicolas Saboly) Make your own perfume in an instant (well, a few). **Oliviers & Co** (☎ 04 92 70 48 20; 19 rue St-Agricol) 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) is 8km southeast of Avignon. Low-cost carrier Flybe flies three times per week from the UK between late May and late October.

There is no public transport into town; a taxi costs about €15.

BUS

The **bus station** (halte routière; ☎ 04 90 82 07 35; blvd St-Roch; ☺ information window 10.15am-1pm & 2-6pm Mon-Fri) is in the basement of the building down the ramp to the right as you exit the train station. Tickets are sold on the buses.

Bus services include Aix-en-Provence (€13.90, one hour), Arles (€7.10, 1½ hours), Carpentras (€4.20, 45 minutes), Marseille (€20, 35 minutes), Nîmes (€7.60, 1¼ hours) and Orange (€5.60, 40 minutes). Most lines operate on Sunday at reduced frequency.

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

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

To reduce traffic within the walls, the city has more than 900 free, monitored parking spaces at **Parking de L'Île Piot**, served by a free shuttle bus from the Porte de l'Oulle in the city centre.

Car-rental agencies:

Avis (☎ 08 20 61 16 50; Avignon Centre train station, 42 blvd St-Roch)

Europcar (☎ 04 90 85 01 40; Avignon Centre train station, 42 blvd St-Roch)

National Citer (☎ 04 90 85 96 47; 2a av Monclar)

TRAIN

Avignon has two train stations: **Gare Avignon TGV**, 4km southwest in the suburb of Courtine, and central **Gare Avignon Centre** (42 blvd St-Roch), where local trains to/from Orange (€5, 20 minutes), Arles (€6, 20 minutes) and Nîmes (€7.70, 30 minutes) arrive/depart.

Some TGVs to/from Paris stop at Gare Avignon Centre, but TGV services such as those to/from Marseille (€20.90, 30 minutes) and Nice (€47.80, 3¼ hours) only use Gare Avignon TGV.

From early July to early September, there's a direct **Eurostar** (www.eurostar.com) service on Saturdays to/from London (six hours) and Ashford (five hours) to Avignon Gare TGV.

Getting Around

BICYCLE & CAR

Motorists can park their cars in **Vinci Park Gare Centre** (☎ 04 90 80 74 40; blvd St-Roch & blvd St-Ruf; ☺ 24hr) beneath the train station and borrow a bike for free to get around.

Provence Bike (☎ 04 90 27 92 61; www.provence-bike.com in French; 52 blvd St-Roch; ☺ 9am-12.30pm & 3-6.30pm Apr-Jun, Sep & Oct, 9am-6.30pm Jul & Aug) rents city bikes for €9/39 per day/week, and mountain bikes for €15 to €25 per day or €75 to €125 per week including helmet, repair kit and road book with map and route description (in English). The shop also rents tandems,

scooters and motorcycles. Out of season, arrange rental by telephone.

BOAT

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

BUS

Local **TCRA** (www.tcra.fr) bus tickets cost €1.10 each on board. Buses run from 7am to about 7.40pm (8am to 6pm and less frequently on Sunday). The most important transfer points are at the main post office and place Pie.

Carnets of 10 tickets (€9) and free **plans du réseau** (bus maps) are available at the **TCRA office** (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 10, which stops in front of the main post office and on the western side of the walled city near Porte de l'Oulle.

Navettes (shuttle buses) link Gare Avignon TGV with the centre (€1.10, 10 to 13 minutes, twice hourly between 6.15am and 11.30pm); buses use the bus stop in front of the main post office on cours Président Kennedy Monday to Saturday, and the Cité Administrative bus stop on cours Jean Jaurès on Sunday.

Bus 11 links Avignon with Villeneuve-lès-Avignon and bus 10 serves Les Angles.

VILLENEUVE-LÈS-AVIGNON

pop 12,078

Across the Rhône from Avignon (and in a different *département*), 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 because many primates affiliated with the papal court built large residences in town. This was despite the fact that it was 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. Stroll over the bridge to see the dramatic tower and fortress and experience the tranquil township.

Information

Tourist office (☎ 04 90 25 61 33; www.villeneuveles-avignon.fr; 1 place Charles David; 🕒 9am-12.30pm & 2-6pm Mon-Sat Sep-Jun, 10am-7pm Mon-Fri, 10am-1pm

& 2-7pm Sat & Sun Jul, 9am-12.30pm & 2-6pm Aug) Runs guided city tours in English on Tuesday and Thursday in July and August.

Sights

The Avignon Passion museum pass (see the boxed text, p162) is valid in Villeneuve.

Crossing Pont Édouard Daladier from Avignon, looming on your left is **Tour Philippe le Bel** (☎ 04 32 70 08 57; full price/pass €1.80/1; 🕒 10am-12.30pm & 2-6.30pm, closed Mon mid-Sep-mid-Jun). If you're up for it, take the steep spiral steps to the top of this 14th-century defensive tower built at what was – then – the northwestern end of Pont St-Bénézet for awesome views of Avignon's walled city. Several **walking and cycling nature trails** start from the foot of the tower; the tourist office has details.

Provençal panoramas also unfold from the turreted, 14th-century **Fort St-André** (☎ 04 90 25 45 35; full price/pass €4.60/3.10; 🕒 10am-1pm & 2-6pm Apr-Sep, 10am-1pm & 2-5pm Oct-Mar).

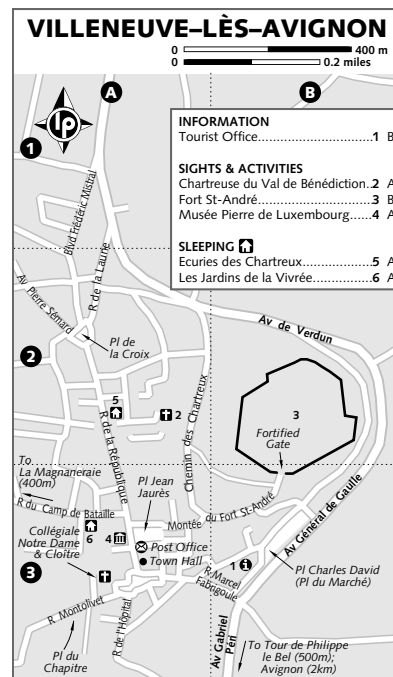
Pope Innocent VI lived in a palatial *livrée* (livery) in Villeneuve-lès-Avignon which, once he became pontiff in 1352, became the **Chartreuse du Val de Bénédiction** (☎ 04 90 15 24 24; 60 rue de la République; full price/pass €6.10/4.10; 🕒 9am-6.30pm May-Aug, 9.30am-5.30pm Sep-Apr). It was once the largest and most significant Carthusian monastery in France and still looks it today.

During the French Revolution the monastery was shut down and its treasures stolen. Many are now displayed at the **Musée Pierre de Luxembourg** (☎ 04 90 27 49 66; rue de la République; full price/pass €3/2; 🕒 10am-12.30pm & 2-6.30pm, closed Mon mid-Sep-mid-Jun). If you're remotely interested in religious art, seek out Enguerrand Quarton's lavish and dramatic 1453 painting *The Crowning of the Virgin*, and ask for the accompanying notes for an insight into its commissioning and underpinning religious dogma.

Sleeping & Eating

Les Jardins de la Vivrée (☎ 04 90 26 05 05; www.la-livree.com in French; 4bis rue du Camp de Bataille; d incl breakfast €60-90; 🍷 🍴) In the centre of town, and handy for Avignon, beautiful high-walled gardens screen a serene swimming pool from the outside world, and each of these four *chambre d'hôte* rooms has tiled floors and natural sunlight. Parking is free.

Ecuries des Chartreux (☎ 04 90 25 79 93; www.ecuries-des-chartreux.com; 66 rue de la République; d €60-115; 🍷) This historic building was once part of the adjoining Chartreuse monastery (above) and has



been impeccably and lovingly restored by hosts Pascale and Antoine. It now incorporates three exposed stone studios (two with lofts) opening onto the garden. The largest, sleeping up to four people, has free private parking by reservation, and all have free wi-fi. Breakfast costs €7, or nip out to the nearby village shops and whip something up yourself in your kitchenette.

La Magnaneraie (☎ 04 90 25 11 11; www.hostellerie-la-magnaneraie.com; 37 rue du Camp de Bataille; d €135-235, ste €240-450; menus €39-80; 🍷 🍴 🍷) White-clothed tables and wicker chairs clustered beneath a canopy of trees create a seductive setting to savour delights like foie gras marinated in peach wine. To prolong the experience, stay overnight in La Magnaneraie's four-star guest rooms in shades of cornflower blue, rose and violet. Higher-priced rooms open to a private balcony or terrace.

Getting There & Away

Villeneuve-lès-Avignon is an easy 15-minute stroll from Avignon's walls.

Bus 11 links Villeneuve-lès-Avignon with Avignon, from where there are extensive connections.

NORTH OF AVIGNON

Unfolding northwest of Avignon are the vineyards of Châteauneuf du Pape and the Roman treasures of Orange. The region extends up to the rocky Dentelles de Montmirail, the slopes of Mont Ventoux and east to the harsh Plateau d'Albion (see the boxed text, p182).

CHÂTEAUNEUF DU PAPE

pop 2098

Eons ago the River Rhône extended up to the Alps. When it receded, it deposited large, smooth, pale, *calcaire* stones in its wake. Those stones now play an integral role in the production of Châteauneuf du Pape's renowned wines, retaining heat trapped during the day to keep the ground a constant temperature after sunset. In 1317 Pope John XXII (r 1316-34) built a pontifical summer residence 18km north of Avignon, Château des Papes, at a former mining hamlet, planting vineyards around the castle.

The best wines of the last *millesime* (vintage) are cracked with gusto around 25 April during the **Fête de la St-Marc**. Other festivities include the **Fête de la Véraison**, held over the first weekend of August (tickets €48), with horse jousting, a Sunday morning Mass in Provençal, a medieval market, and feasting in conical tents, washed down with papal wine.

Amid the vineyards, the dignified village of Châteauneuf du Pape is lorded over by the ruined **papal castle**. Burnt during both the Wars of Religion (1562-98) and WWII, its remains standing on a 118m hillock at the village's northern end, a 10-minute walk from the **tourist office** (☎ 04 90 83 71 08; <http://perso.wanadoo.fr/ot-chaton-pape> in French; place du Portail; 🕒 9.30am-7pm Mon-Sat Jul & Aug, 9.30am-12.30pm & 2-6pm Mon-Sat Sep-Jun), with panoramic views over Avignon, the Plateau de Vaucluse, the Luberon, the Rhône and beyond.

Wine Tasting

Splashed around town are more than two dozen wine shops offering *dégustation gratuite* (free wine tasting).

Tastings are also free at the **Musée du Vin** (☎ 04 90 83 70 07; www.brotte.com; rte d'Avignon; admission free; 🕒 9am-1pm & 2-7pm mid-May-mid-Oct, 9am-noon & 2-6pm mid-Oct-mid-May), which has a collection of old tools and extensive information about the area's soils, grape varieties and wine-making processes. Nearby, learn about the history

AN APPELLATION DETOUR

Meandering among the vineyards is the ultimate way to appreciate the Châteauneuf du Pape's celebrated grapes (followed, of course, by a taste).

Covering just 32 sq km between Avignon and Orange on the Rhône's left bank, the manually harvested vines of the coveted Châteauneuf du Pape appellation are rigidly controlled by regulations that predate any *appellation d'origine contrôlée* (AOC). In 1923, decorated WWI fighter pilot, lawyer and viticulturalist Baron Le Roy de Boiseaumarié defined the boundaries – literally and figuratively, establishing the region's first syndicate of wine-growers. AOCs became a national system in 1935.

The appellation's still-enforced rules stipulate a maximum output of 35 hectolitres comprising a maximum of 13 grapes, of which 60% to 70% are Grenache. The minimum alcohol level is 12½% (maximum 15%). Annual production is sold years in advance, commanding €300-odd a bottle, but a run-of-the-mill red from 2002/2000 sells for €14.60/18. Châteauneuf also produces some wonderful whites, though rosés are forbidden.

Follow av St-Joseph (the westbound D17) out of the village, then turn right (north) at the '*circuit touristique*' sign along chemin de l'Arnesque and chemin de Pradel, passing row upon stone-cruised row of vineyards. Stop at **Château Mont Redon** (☎ 04 90 83 72 75; www.chateau-montredon.fr in French; ☎ cellar 8am-7pm Thu-Tue, 8am-noon & 2-6pm Wed, closed Sun early Jan–mid-Feb) for a tipple (visits are by appointment) before rounding the corner for a mesmerising view of Mont Ventoux.

Returning to Châteauneuf, cross the village and head southeast along av Baron Le Roy and follow the signs to the right (south) for a final free tasting at **Château Fortia** (☎ 04 90 83 72 25; www.chateau-fortia.com; rte de Bedarrides; ☎ cellar 9am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Sat, 2-6pm Sun) on the southern fringe of town, which is still held by Baron Le Roy de Boiseaumarié's family today.

of chocolate with artisan **chocolatier Bernard Castelain** (☎ 04 90 83 54 71; rte d'Avignon; admission free; 9am-noon & 2-7pm Mon-Sat, closed 1st week Jan).

The tourist office has details of producers in the area that allow cellar visits and offer free tastings by appointment (generally Monday to Friday). English tours are often available with advance notice. For more on Châteauneuf's seminal appellation see the boxed text, above.

Sleeping & Eating

La Mère Germaine (☎ 04 90 83 54 37; www.lameregermaine.com; place de la Fontaine; d €50-70; lunch menu €16, evening menus €22-85; P) Eight charming rooms slumber above this village restaurant (closed Tuesday night, all day Wednesday and Sunday night). The *menu pontifical* includes seven surprise courses accompanied by seven different glasses of papal wine.

La Sommellerie (☎ 04 90 83 50 00; www.hotel-la-sommellerie.com in French; d €70-107, ste €90-133; menus €30-80; P) This 17th-century former sheepfold is now a haven of peace and tranquility, situated in glorious countryside 3km out of the village along the westbound D17. There are to a dozen rooms (and two suites) with rustic beamed ceilings and classical colours. Chef Pierre Paumel creates mouthwatering *menus* at the on-site restaurant, and also offers cook-

ing courses (minimum of four participants) on demand (prices and dates vary).

Maison Felisa (☎ 04 66 39 99 84; www.maison-felisa.com; 6 rue des Barris, St-Laurent des Arbres; d €110-150; P) Across the River Rhône in the medieval village of St-Laurent des Arbres, 15km west of Châteauneuf and handy if you're visiting the Pont du Gard and Nîmes, this tranquil *maison d'hôte* rejuvenates the weariest of travellers. Bed linen is ironed with jasmine-scented water, on-site spa treatments include Ayurvedic massages, and cooking classes and a nourishing table d'hôte are available by reservation. There's a two-night minimum stay.

Hostellerie du Château des Fines Roches (☎ 04 90 83 70 23; www.chateaufinesroches.com; d €160-206; lunch menus €16-32, dinner menus €35-60; P) At the end of an elongated driveway through the vineyards, 2km south along the Avignon-bound D17, this fairy-tale 19th-century castle has a splendid restaurant with views extending from its terrace to the papal chateau. Above the library (where Mistral and Daudet debated literature), grand rooms have flourishes like poster beds, clawfoot baths, and in a couple, a shower in the turret. Outside May to October, Fines Roches closes each Sunday after lunch and accepts guests from Tuesday afternoon; it closes completely during November and two weeks of February.

Other dining recommendations:

La Marmite (☎ 04 90 83 78 45; 22 rue Joseph Ducos; menus €17-19; ☎ lunch & dinner Wed-Mon, lunch only mid-Nov-Mar; ☎) Refreshingly simple in such an upmarket village, cooking up regional cuisine.

Le Pistou (☎ 04 90 83 71 75; 15 rue Ducos; menus €15-30; ☎ lunch Tue-Sun, dinner Tue-Sat, closed Jan; ☎) A local favourite for its namesake summertime *pistou* (pesto) soup.

Le Verger des Papes (☎ 04 90 83 50 40; 4 rue du Château; menus €19-27; ☎ lunch & dinner Mar-mid-Dec; ☎) Touts a panoramic terrace perched at the pinnacle of the village and two brothers turning out traditional dishes paired with wines from the cavernous cellar.

Getting There & Away

Rapides du Sud-Est (☎ 04 90 34 15 59) operates buses to/from Orange (€2.70, 15 minutes, two or three daily). On school days, buses also run to Avignon (€3.70, 40 minutes, one or two daily). In Châteauneuf buses use the stop on av du Général de Gaulle.

ORANGE

pop 28,889

This friendly little city has a refreshingly down-to-earth ambience among its plazas,

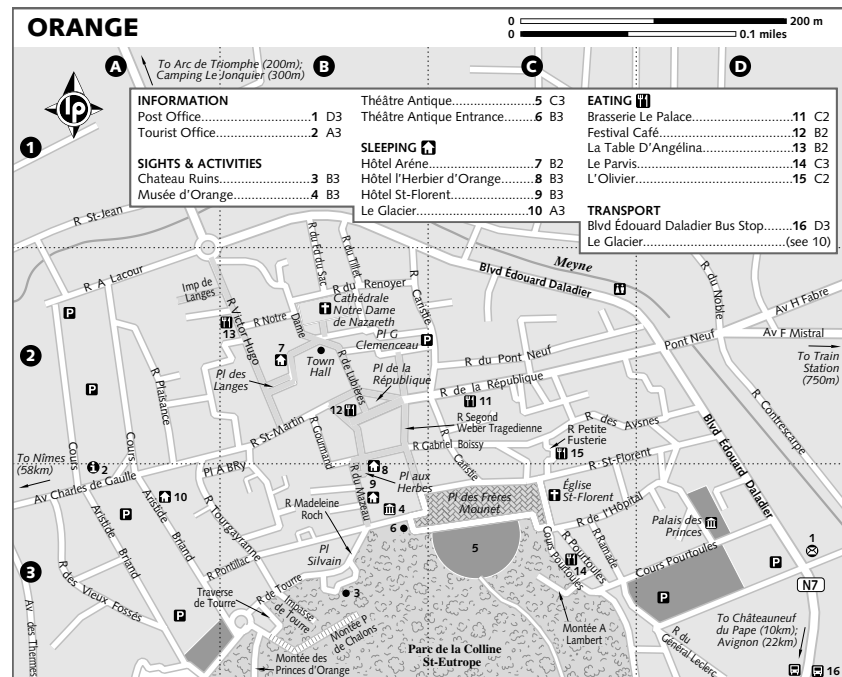
fountains and cobweb of pedestrian streets; and is generally more affordable than its Provençal neighbours too.

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; and later 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.

Orange is home to two of Provence's juiciest Roman treasures: a steep, spectacular theatre and a magnificent triumphal arch.

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 Georges Clemenceau with the tourist office, 250m to the west. Théâtre



Antique, Orange's magnificent Roman theatre, 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 Pourtoles for the Théâtre Antique.

Information

Post office (679 blvd Édouard Daladier) The only place in Orange that changes money.

Tourist office (☎ 04 90 34 70 88; www.otorange.fr; 5 cours Aristide Briand; ☎ 9.30am-7pm Mon-Sat, 10am-4pm Sun Apr-Sep, 10am-1pm & 2-5pm Mon-Sat Oct-Mar) Closed mid-January, but phones are staffed.

Sights

THÉÂTRE ANTIQUE

For an unforgettable first ogle at Orange's Roman theatre (☎ 04 90 51 17 60; adult/student €7.70/5.60; ☎ 9am-7pm Jun-Aug, 9am-6pm Apr, May & Sep, 9.30am-5.30pm Oct & Mar, 9.30am-4.30pm Jan, Feb, Nov & Dec), take the steep back stairs to the top, which affords an awesome view down the raked seating to the stage. 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 *mur de scène* (stage wall) is the only such Roman structure still standing in the world in its entirety, minus a few mosaics and the roof. A brand-new roof was under construction at the time of research, staking another claim as the only modern enhancement of its kind to an ancient structure. Admission includes a seven-language audioguide.

The admission price is also good for entry to the **Musée d'Orange** (museum only adult/child €4.50/3.50; ☎ 9.15am-6.45pm Jun-Aug, 9.15am-6.45pm May & Sep, 9.45am-12.15pm & 1.30-5.15pm Mar, Apr & Oct, 9.45am-12.15pm & 1.30-4.15pm Jan, Feb, Nov & Dec)

IT TAKES A VILLAGE...

It takes a village to raise a child, so the proverb goes, and it takes dedicated international volunteers to restore the ruined medieval village of **St-Victor la Coste**.

If you've dreamed of renovating a Provençal property, volunteering for the lauded **La Sabranenque project** (www.sabranenque.com) can see it to fruition, and help preserve Provence's historic architecture and traditional village way of life into the bargain. Alongside local craftsmen, you'll be involved in anything from cutting stones and dry-walling to tiling or paving in the mornings, with afternoons free to explore the area.

Restoration programmes run between March and September. French isn't a requirement as some project directors speak English, but you must be over 18 and physically fit. Costs (from €530 per week) include accommodation and chef-prepared meals shared around an outdoor communal table. Some programmes include a regional sightseeing tour.

St-Victor is situated 20km west of Châteauneuf du Pape and 27km southwest of Orange.

across the road, with some treasures of its own including segments of the Roman survey registers (essentially the precursor to the tax department) and the friezes that formed part of the theatre's scenery.

Follow montée Philbert de Chalons or montée A Lambert to the top of **Colline St-Eutrope** (St-Eutrope Hill; elevation 97m) for an elevated theatre panorama, where a circular viewing table explains what's what. En route you pass the ruins of a 12th-century **château**, the former residence of the princes of Orange.

ARC DE TRIOMPHE

Uncannily like Paris' iconic arch, Orange's 1st-century AD **triumphal arch** stands a proud 19m high and wide, and 8m thick, at the northern end of av de l'Arc de Triomphe, about 450m northwest of the town centre. On its façade, ornate sculptures commemorate the Romans' victories over the Gauls in 49 BC as a not-so-subtle reminder to travellers approaching the city.

Festivals & Events

In June and August Théâtre Antique comes alive with all-night concerts and cinema screenings during the **Les Nocturnes d'Été** (summer nights) series. During late July and early August, it hosts **Les Chorégies d'Orange** (www.choregies.com), a series of weekend operas, classical concerts and choral performances. Festival tickets (€20 to €200) must be reserved months beforehand. A week-long **jazz festival** swings into town in June.

Sleeping

Hôtel l'Herbier d'Orange (☎ 04 90 34 09 23; www.lherbierdorange.com in French; 8 place aux Herbes; s €25-32, d €30-47, tr €45-52) A groovy choice for style-conscious,

budget-conscious travellers, this retro-funky pad run by a hip young team has 20 rooms with arctic white walls starkly contrasted with lavender, maroon, yellow or dark chocolate brown. The cheapest rooms come with a sink only but all have TVs, telephones, and fridges to chill Provençal wine.

Hôtel St-Florent (☎ 04 90 34 18 53; fax 04 90 51 17 25; 4 rue du Mazeau; s €27, d €35-75) A trip of a place, the St-Florent has 17 colourful, chintzy rooms with giant murals and antique wooden beds with crushed and studded velvet. Cheapies have toilets outside the rooms. Wear your sunglasses when you head to the breakfast room – a frenzy of iridescent orange tablecloths, a frenzy of fake flowers and blinking Christmas lights.

Le Glacier (☎ 04 90 34 02 01; www.le-glacier.com; 46 cours Aristide Briand; d €47-95; ☎ ☎) Cosy and bright, with cute blue and yellow rooms, and in an ultrahandy location near the Théâtre Antique, Le Glacier is a welcoming, kind-hearted staff who can recommend cycling itineraries of the nearby countryside and villages.

Hôtel Arène (☎ 04 90 11 40 40; www.hotel-arene.fr; place des Langes; s €56-64, d €77-140; ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) With a whole floor dedicated to hypoallergenic, ecological rooms, the Arène is privately owned and run with meticulous attention to detail. Furnishings in all 35 rooms, even its whimsically named 'Romantique' and 'Charme' rooms, are modern and streamlined. Downstairs there's a bright bar/breakfast room with Illy coffee and free wi-fi (you might also pick up a signal in your room). Parking costs €8.

Camping Le Jonquier (☎ 04 90 34 49 48; www.avignon-et-provence.com/le-jonquier in French; 1321 rue Alexis Carrel; camping €22.80; ☎ mid-Mar-Sep; ☎) Splash in the pool, or play minigolf or tennis at this place near the Arc de Triomphe. Take bus 1 from the République stop (av Frédéric Mistral, 600m from the train station) to the Arc de Triomphe. From there walk 100m back, turn right onto rue des Phocéens and right again onto rue des Étudiants and cross the football field.

Eating

Orange's pedestrianised streets and squares overflow with well-priced, well-patronised restaurants and cafés.

Brasserie Le Palace (☎ 04 90 34 13 51; 7 rue de la République; mains €7; ☎ 8am-7.30pm Mon-Sat summer, shorter hr winter) Squeeze in with the locals over a drink or casual *plat* at this clattering old-school brasserie with red vinyl booths, a collection of old clocks, and aromatic coffees (€1.30).

La Table d'Angéline (☎ 04 90 30 28 36; 23 rue Victor Hugo; mains €12; ☎ ☎) lunch & dinner Tue-Sat summer, lunch Tue-Sat, dinner Fri & Sat winter) A pastel-pretty place tucked in a 16th-century vaulted dining room, the tiny La Table D'Angéline specialises in cooking up whatever's freshest at the markets.

L'Olivier (☎ 04 90 11 05 22; 12 rue Petite Fusterie; mains €15-19.80; ☎) closed dinner Wed, lunch Sat & all day Sun winter, closed Sun summer) Remember the name Olivier Teissedre – it won't be the last time you hear of this rising chef, who is creating a buzz at his little French-washed place. Must-tries from the blackboard are Olivier's *tartes* (including veggie ones), *ravioles* (itty-bitty cheese-and-herb local specialties), and his handmade nougat *glacé* (covered ice cream). The restaurant has wi-fi.

Classic fare stars at the terrace-only **Festival Café** (☎ 04 90 34 65 58; 5 place de la République; mains €8-10; ☎) lunch & dinner Apr-Oct, closed Nov-Mar), which sets up a marquee in inclement weather; and at **Le Parvis** (☎ 04 90 34 82 00; 55 cours Pourtoles; mains from €17; ☎) closed Sun dinner & all day Mon), Orange's gastronomic gem.

SELF-CATERING

The town's central streets are lined with stalls each Thursday morning during its weekly market. If you'll need to move your car before the market wraps up, park at the edges of the city.

Getting There & Around

There's no longer a bus station, but buses stop on blvd Édouard Daladier, southwest of the post office, and travel to destinations including Avignon (€5.60, 40 minutes) and Vaison-la-Romaine (€5.10, 45 minutes).

Orange's **train station** (☎ 04 90 11 88 64, 3635; av Frédéric Mistral) has services south to Avignon (€5, 20 minutes), Marseille (€19.50, 1½ hours) and beyond and north including Lyon (€24.30, 2¼ hours).

Le Glacier (☎ 04 90 34 02 01; www.le-glacier.com; 46 cours Aristide Briand) rents bikes (per half/full day €12/16).

VAISON-LA-ROMAINE

pop 5986

This quintessentially Provençal village has a plane-tree-dappled pedestrianised centre and also stretches across the River Ouvèze to the walled Cité Médiévale (mediaeval city) perched on the hilltop.

Vaison has a rich Roman legacy, with the largest archaeological site in France. Originally a Celtic city, it was conquered by the

Romans in the 2nd century BC. They left a treasure-trove of remains including the picturesque bridge that connects the town's heart with the Cité Médiévale, where the counts of Toulouse built their 12th-century castle.

Situated at the crossroads of Provence, 23km and 47km northeast of Orange and Avignon respectively, and 10km north of Carpentras, Vaison is also a prime staging post for Mont Ventoux mountain forays (p180).

Orientation

The flood-prone River 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 then left again into rue Colonel Parazols, which leads past the Fouilles de Puymin excavations along rue Burrhus.

Information

Post office Opposite place du 11 Novembre. Has an exchange service and Cyberposte.

Tourist office (☎ 04 90 36 02 11; www.vaison-la-romaine.com; place du Chanoine Sautel; ☏ 9am-noon & 2-6.45pm daily 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) Just off av du Général de Gaulle.

Sights

GALLO-ROMAN RUINS

The ruined remains of Vasio Vocontiorum, the Roman city that flourished here from the 6th to 2nd centuries BC, are unearthed at two sites covered by a single admission.

At **Puymin** (av du Général de Gaulle; both Puymin & La Villasse adult/child €7.50/4; ☏ 10am-noon & 2-5pm Oct-Dec & early Feb, 10am-noon & 2-6pm Mar, 9.30am-6pm Apr & May, 9am-noon & 6.30pm Jun-Sep, closed Jan-early Feb) you can see **houses**, **mosaics**, the still-functioning **Théâtre Antique** (built around AD 20 for an audience of 6000) and an **archaeological museum** (☏ 10am-noon & 2-5pm Oct-Dec & early Feb, 10am-noon & 2-6pm Mar, 10.30am-6pm Apr & May, 10.30am-6.45pm Jun-Sep, closed Jan-early Feb) with a swag of statues – including the silver bust of a 3rd-century patrician and likenesses of Hadrian and his wife Sabina.

Colonnaded shops and a limestone-paved street with an underground sewer are visible at **La Villasse** (both Puymin & La Villasse adult/child €7.50/4;

☏ 10am-noon & 2-5pm Oct-Dec & early Feb, 10am-noon & 2-6pm Mar-May, 10.30am-noon & 2.30-6pm Jun-Sep, closed Jan-early Feb), to the west of the same road.

Admission includes an audioguide and entry to the 12th-century Romanesque **doister** (doister visit only €1.50; ☏ 10am-noon & 2-5pm Oct-Dec & early Feb, 10am-noon & 2-6pm Mar, 10am-noon & 2-6pm Apr & May, 10am-12.15pm & 2-5.45pm Jun-Sep, closed Jan-early Feb) of the **Cathédrale Notre-Dame de Nazareth**, a five-minute walk west across rue du Bon Ange from La Villasse.

From April to September, there are free guided tours in English; 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 **chateau** built by the counts of Toulouse, which was modernised in the 15th century only to be later abandoned. Entry to the chateau is only available by guided tour (in French; €2) – check with the tourist office (left) for schedules.

JARDIN DES NEUF DAMOISELLES

Heading 1km west out of town along the D975 towards Orange brings you to the stone and bamboo garden created by sculptor Serge Boyer. A memorial to those who died in Vaison's 1992 floods, the **Jardin des Neuf Damoiselles** (Garden of Nine Damsels) centres on a square of nine granite blocks, each representing one of Europe's cities of culture in 2000 and engraved with a short poem of love and peace, written by a native poet of each city. Around it, 72 hefty boulders – each representing a different town in the world with respective inscriptions – spiral outwards to form a monumental sundial.

Festivals & Events

In July dance takes centre stage at Puymin's Théâtre Antique during the two-week **Festival de Vaison-la-Romaine** (www.vaison-festival.com in French) and polyphonic performances can be seen at the Cathédrale Notre-Dame de Nazareth during the **Festival des Choeurs Lauréats**.

Choralies, a two-week choral festival held every three years in August, is Europe's largest. The next take place in 2007 and 2010.

Vaison is one of a dozen villages in the area to partake in the **Festival des Soupes** (Soup Festival; admission free; soup €5-6), held from October to early November. The villages come to life

when they take it in turns to host these communal feasts, which the other participating villages attend. Tourist offices sell a festival recipe book (€20) featuring 155 soups to keep you warm throughout winter.

Sleeping

CHAMBRES D'HÔTES

Jade en Provence (☎ 04 90 28 81 60; www.jade-en-provence.com in French; av André Coudray; d incl breakfast €65-75; Ⓜ ☎ ☑ ☐ ☙ ☚ ☛) Named after hosts Sabrina and Pierre's young daughter, this family-friendly spot a 500m stroll north of the village centre has five sparkling rooms set at the back of a large garden. Cook in the extensively equipped communal kitchen or book ahead for an all-inclusive table d'hôte (€30).

La Calade (☎ 04 90 46 51 79; www.la-calade-vaision.com; rue Calade, St-Romain-en-Viennois; d incl breakfast €70; ☏ Easter-Oct) Just 3km northeast of Vaison in the postcard-pretty stone village St-Romain-en-Viennois (worth a trip even if you're not setting down your suitcases here), this sweet little *chambre d'hôte* is furnished with 19th-century family heirlooms and opens to a fountain courtyard. Views across the village and beyond extend from the rooftop terrace. Credit cards are not accepted.

L'Évêché (☎ 04 90 36 13 46; http://eveche.free.fr; rue de l'Évêché; d €70-80, d ste €80-120) Filled with art, antiques, books and fresh flowers, this former 15th-century *évêché* (bishop's residence) in the medieval city has been the ongoing restoration project of hosts Aude and Jean-Loup since they acquired it as a ruin. Three of its five en suite rooms have a separated sitting area, and one has a sun-drenched private terrace. Vehicle access is tricky; it's easier to park in the village and stroll up.

Three heavenly *chambre d'hôte* rooms (€110 to €140 including breakfast) slumber above Vaison's temple to gastronomy, Moulin à Huile (right).

HOTELS

Escapade (☎ 04 90 36 00 78; www.escapade-vacances.com/vaison; av César Geoffroy; d with obligatory half-board €38-42; ☏ dosed Dec-Feb) Around 500m southeast of town along the river, this modern family resort is set over peaceful, sprawling grounds with views of Mont Ventoux. This being France, half-board includes wine; breakfast is €5.50.

Hôtel Burrhus (☎ 04 90 36 00 11; www.burrhus.com; 1 place de Montfort; d €44-69, apt €98; ☏ closed mid-Nov-late Dec, plus Sun Jan & Feb) Right on Vaison's vibrant

central square, Burrhus looks like a quaint old-world place from the outside, but inside its 38 rooms have stunning cutting-edge colours (including one vision in all white), funky streamlined furnishings, mosaic bathrooms and dramatic designer lighting. Parking costs €7.

Hostellerie Le Beffroi (☎ 04 90 36 04 71; www.le-beffroi.com; rue de l'Évêché; d €68-130; ☏ closed late Jan-late Mar; Ⓜ ☎ ☑ ☐ ☙ ☚ ☛) Within the Cité Médiévale'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-beam rooms are romantically furnished, and there's a glass-paned breakfast room and summer terrace tumbling onto a rambling rose-and-herb garden with kids' swings. It has been held by the same family since 1904. You can park out the front (spaces are limited and access is tight), or there's a lock-up garage for €8 per day 150m down the hill.

Eating

Le Bateleur (☎ 04 90 36 28 04; 1 place Théodore Aubanel; menus €18-38; ☏ lunch Tue-Fri & Sun, dinner Tue, Wed & Fri-Sun) In two cosy dining rooms, one of which overlooks the rushing river, this is a convivial place for Provençal fare. Vegan alert: lunchtime mains consist of two choices, meat or fish.

Hostellerie Le Beffroi (☎ 04 90 36 04 71; www.le-beffroi.com; rue de l'Évêché; menus €28-45; ☏ lunch Sat & Sun, dinner Wed-Mon; Ⓜ ☙ ☚ ☛) In the rich red wallpaped dining room of this rambling hotel (see above) or on the summertime terrace, this graciously old-fashioned restaurant serves Provençal specialities such as duck with lavender honey, monkfish in bacon and mushroom sauce, with local wines; and for dessert, a bitter chocolate cake in coffee and walnut sauce.

Moulin à Huile (☎ 04 90 36 20 67; www.robert-bardot.com; quai Maréchal Foch; lunch menu from €40, dinner menu from €60; ☏ lunch & dinner Tue-Sat, lunch Sun) Master chef Robert Bardot refines and redefines the art of gastronomic cooking at this old clementine-coloured oil mill by the river in the shadow of the Cité Médiévale. Like all great artists (he also paints the watercolour illustrations on the menus), Bardot believes his cooking would be 'insipid if it was not flavoured by a touch of madness'. Sample a cross-section of his creations with his €76 tasting plate.

Other dining recommendations:
Ristorante Gino (☎ 04 90 36 31 05; 1 Grand Rue; mains €12.50-30; ☏ lunch Mon, Tue, Thu, Fri & Sun, dinner Mon, Thu & Fri-Sun) Atmospheric Italian restaurant in a stone-walled subterranean dining room.

Auberge La Bartavelle (☎ 04 90 36 02 16; 12 place Sus-Auze; mains €16-35; 🍴 lunch Tue-Thu, Sat & Sun, dinner Tue-Sun, closed Jan) Popular spot for traditional cuisine such as rabbit-filled ravioli.

Le Brin d'Olivier (☎ 04 90 28 74 79; 4 rue du Ventoux; lunch menus €19-25, dinner menu €38; 🍴 lunch & dinner) Near the Pont Romain adjacent to quai Pasteur, specialising in all things truffle.

SELF-CATERING

Wines, honey, jam and nougat are all local specialities available at the tourist office's on-site boutique (p174).

A magnificent market snakes through the central streets Tuesdays from 6.30am to 1pm.

Getting There & Around

Vaison's bus station, where **Lieutard buses** (☎ Vaison 04 90 36 05 22, Avignon 04 90 86 36 75; av des Chorales; 🕒 9am-noon & 2-7pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon Sat) 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, 1¼ hours) and Carpentras (€4.30, 45 minutes).

Rent two-wheelers at **Mag 2 Roues** (☎ 04 90 28 80 46; www.mag2roues.com in French; cours Taulignan; 🕒 8.30am-noon & 2-7pm Mon-Sat).

ENCLAVE DES PAPES & AROUND

Shaped like one of the truffles for which the area is famed, the bumpy ball of land constituting the Enclave des Papes has been part of the Vaucluse since 1791 despite being buried within the Drôme *département*. Its extrication today is a result of the refusal of French king Charles VII (r 1422–61) to sell any of his kingdom to the papacy, leaving this enclave, with a diameter of less than 20km, in the hands of the Pope from 1318 until the French Revolution.

Surrounding this anomaly is the area known as Drôme Provençale. East of the enclave is the fabulous foodie town, Nyons (the 's' is pronounced), where ancient groves grow fêted olives.

Information

Nyons tourist office (☎ 04 75 26 10 35; www.paysde-nyons.com; place de la Libération; 🕒 9.30am-noon & 2.30-6pm Mon-Sat, 10am-1pm Sun Jun-Sep, 9.30am-noon & 2.30-6pm Mon-Sat Oct-May) Comprehensive information including accommodation options for the region.

Valréas tourist office (☎ 04 90 35 04 71; www.ot-valreas.info; place Aristide Briand; 🕒 9.15am-12.15pm & 2-7pm Mon-Sat Jul & Aug, 9.15am-12.15pm & 2-6pm Mon-Sat Sep-Jun)

Sights

Driving or cycling around the enclave and its environs rewards with visual and gastronomic treats.

Medieval **Valréas** (population 9500; elevation 250m), 29km north of Vaison-la-Romaine, is the primary town here. During the 19th century the town was known for its cardboard production, the history of which unfolds in the world's only **Musée du Cartonnage et de l'Imprimerie** (Cardboard & Printing Museum; ☎ 04 90 35 58 75; musee-cartonnage-imp@cg84.fr; 3 av Maréchal Foch; adult/under 12yr €3.50/free; 🕒 10am-noon & 3-6pm Mon & Wed-Sat, 3-6pm Sun Apr-Oct, 10am-noon & 2-5pm Mon & Wed-Sat, 2-5pm Sun Nov-Mar). Among Valréas' many festivals, including celebrations of its wine, lavender and medieval heritage, the most endearing is the **Nuit du Petit St-Jean**. Each year on 23 June, Valréassiens in traditional dress bear torches and parade through the old-town streets, climaxing with the crowning of a three- to five-year-old boy as the new Petit St-Jean (Little St John).

Lavender fields and treasure troves of truffles hidden underground (see the boxed text, p178) surround Valréas and the fortified villages of **Grillon**, **Visan** and **Richerenches**.

Olive groves stretch across the border to golden-hued **Nyons** (population 7000; elevation 271m). The **Institut du Monde de l'Olivier** (☎ 04 75 26 90 90; www.monde-olivier.com in French; 40 place de la Libération) runs 1½-hour olive workshops with tastings at 3pm on Thursdays between June and September and there are several mills where you can buy Nyons' AOC oil. An easy **Sentier des Oliviers** (Olive Walking Trail) takes in a 4km round-trip circuit, with explanatory panels (in French) along the way. A free brochure outlining the route is available from the tourist office, where the trail begins and ends.

Hop 3km across the enclave's western border to **Suze-la-Rousse** (population 1591) to learn about wine at France's **Université du Vin** (University of Wine; ☎ 04 75 97 21 34; www.universite-du-vin.com in French), inside the magnificent 12th- to 14th-century Château de la Suze.

Sleeping & Eating

Le Mas des Sources (☎ 04 90 41 95 90; www.mas-des-sources.com in French; quartier Lacoste, Visan; d incl breakfast €70; 🍴 🍷) In a calm, countryfied setting this ochre-coloured *mas* (farmhouse) has three Provençal *chambre d'hôte* rooms, a swimming pool to cool off in and, best of all, host Martine's table d'hôte (€25) with speciali-

ties including escargots in garlic butter and truffle omelettes in season. From Visan, take the direction of Vaison-la-Romaine for 200m then take the first turn left, head straight to the crossroad and follow the dirt track to the farmhouse.

Hôtel-Restaurant Colombet (☎ 04 75 26 03 66; www.hotelcolombet.com; 53 place de la Libération; d incl breakfast €66-115; menus from €22; 🍴 🍷 🍷 🍷) Handy for the tourist office and a hop, skip and a jump from Nyons' medieval village, this bright, light-filled, unpretentious hotel has reading rooms, 27 fresh guest rooms in pretty Provençal shades, an outdoor terrace and a decent restaurant. The cheapest rooms have a private toilet outside the room. Garaged parking costs €9.50.

Une Autre Maison (☎ 04 75 26 43 09; www.uneautre-maison.com; place de la République; d €60-135; menu €35; 🕒 closed early Nov-early Feb; 🍴 🍷 🍷 🍷) Despite its name, this exquisite place in Nyons' heart is anything but just 'another house'. Its seven artistically decorated rooms are whimsically set around an aromatic cypress- and cicada-filled garden, with an inviting swimming pool and Jacuzzi; its restaurant is also open to non-guests for dinner nightly. Wi-fi is free.

SELF-CATERING

Don't leave Nyons without biting into a *saucisson aux olives de Nyons* (Nyons olive sausage) from *boucheries* (butcher's shops) around town.

Getting There & Around

Taxi Sud Provence (☎ 04 75 46 52 25; www.transports-sudprovence.com) runs a variety of themed tours including lavender roads, vineyard roads, truffle roads and more, and can also customise trips throughout the area.

DENTELLES DE MONTMIRAIL & AROUND

The intricate limestone spires of the Dentelles de Montmirail take their name from the *dentelles* (lace) they resemble. (Some say they're named after the spindly pins on a lace-making board, which has equal visual merit.) Vineyards entwine the lower slopes, and climbers dangle perilously on threaded ropes from the southern face around Gigondas. The rocky terrain, which weaves east to Mont Ventoux (p180), offers spectacular walking and cycling.

See also the itinerary, p155, outlining a day-long cycling/driving loop from Vaison-la-Romaine.

Information

Beaumes de Venise tourist office (Maison des Dentelles; ☎ 04 90 62 94 39; www.ot-beaumesdevenise.com; place du Marché; 🕒 9am-noon & 2-7pm Mon-Sat) Has lists of estates to taste and buy local wines.

Gigondas tourist office (☎ 04 90 65 85 46; ot-gigondas@axit.fr; place du Portail; 🕒 10am-12.30pm & 2.30-6pm Jul & Aug, 10am-noon & 2-5pm Mon-Sat Sep-Jun) Information on walking and cycling routes in the Dentelles.

Malauène tourist office (☎ /fax 04 90 65 22 59; ot-malauene@axit.fr; place de la Mairie; 🕒 10am-noon & 2.30-4.30pm Mon-Sat) Covers the entire Dentelles de Montmirail and Mont Ventoux area including accommodation information.

Sights

In the 14th century Pope Clement V had a residence at **Malauène** (population 2581; elevation 350m), 10km south of Vaison-la-Romaine. His legacy is the military-style Gothic-Romanesque **Eglise St-Michel & St-Pierre**, constructed in 1309 on the site of an ancient temple. Coiled around its former fortress (of which only a couple of gates remain) with a beautiful plane tree-lined main street, the town is a central starting point for forays both into the Dentelles and up Mont Ventoux.

Around 6km southwest of Malauène, little **Le Barroux** (population 574; elevation 325m) tumbles down the hillside from its medieval **Château du Barroux** (☎ 04 90 62 35 21; chateau.barroux.free.fr; adult/child €3.50/free; 🕒 10am-7pm Sat & Sun Apr & May, 2.30-7pm Jun, 10am-7pm Jul-Sep, 2-6pm Oct). **Gregorian chants** are sung at 9.30am (10am Sunday and holidays) by Benedictine monks at Le Barroux's **Abbaye Ste-Madeleine** (☎ 04 90 62 56 31; rte de Suzette), a lavender-surrounded monastery built in Romanesque style in the 1980s. Monk-made bread, cakes and the like are sold in the monastery shop. Hats, miniskirts, bare shoulders and mobile phones are forbidden in the church. With advance reservation, free guided visits are possible at the llama farm, **Ferme Expérimentale d'Élevage de Lamas** (☎ 04 90 65 25 46; rte du Lac du Paty), 1km along the D19 from Le Barroux towards Bédoin.

The sheltered position of **Beaumes de Venise** (population 2070; elevation 126m), 10km southwest of Le Barroux at the crossroads of the D21 and the D90, spares it from the mighty mistral winds. Beaumes' olive oil is sampled and sold at the **Moulin à Huile de la Balmeène** (☎ 04 90 62 93 77; av Jules Ferry; 🕒 8am-noon & 2-6.30pm Mon-Sat, 2-6.30pm Sun Apr-Aug, 8am-noon & 2-6.30pm Mon-Sat Sep-Mar), in business since 1856. But the

BLACK DIAMONDS

Provence's cloak-and-dagger truffle trade – operated out of a car boot, with payment exclusively by cold, hard cash – is a real black business.

Little known Richerenches, a deceptively wealthy village shielded within the thick walls of a 12th- to 13th-century Templar fortress, is the congruous setting for Provence's leading wholesale market for the far-from-appetising-looking fungus. Once a year villagers celebrate a truffle Mass in the village church, during which parishioners offer up truffles instead of cash donations. The Mass falls on the closest Sunday to 17 January, the feast day of Antoine, the patron saint of truffle harvesters. Contact Richerenches' **Point Tourisme** (☎ 04 90 28 05 34; www.richerenches.fr in French; rue du Campanile; ☎ 2-6.30pm Mon, 9am-12.30pm & 2-6.30pm Tue-Fri, 9.30am-12.30pm Sat) for details.

Crisp, cold Saturday mornings during the truffle season (November to March) see *av de la Rebasse* – Richerenches' main street – resound with the furtive whisperings of local *rabassaires* (truffle hunters) selling their weekly harvest to big-time dealers from Paris, Germany, Italy or beyond. Just a handful of dealers attend the weekly market, inspecting, weighing and invariably buying kilos of these black diamonds. Their *courtiers* (brokers) mingle with the truffle hunters to scout out the best truffles and keep tabs on deals being cut by rivals.

Individuals generally have their own dealer whom they telephone to place an order. In the Carpentras area, *trufficulteur* **Jean-François Tourrette** (☎ 06 18 11 32 03, 04 90 66 03 71; jftourrette@wanadoo.fr; Grand rue, Venasque; truffle hunting per person €25; ☎ by appointment) and his family has been in the truffle-hunting business for generations, and Jean-François is now creating a small 'truffle society' dealing with consulting, producing and other truffle-related information, opening up this elusive truffle culture for the public. His truffle-hunting tours run when a minimum of eight people have booked.

Dominique and Eric Jaumard (☎ 04 90 66 82 21; www.truffes-ventoux.com; La Quinsonne), 7km southwest of Carpentras in Monteux, have hunted, harvested and sold truffles from their land for a couple of decades. Between November and March you can go truffle-hunting with them and their dogs (prices arranged on inquiry), or discover the taste of fresh truffles during a truffle-tasting workshop. Year-round they sell (less tasty) frozen or canned truffles as well as truffle juice, truffle vinegar, acacia and truffle honey, truffle olive oil and more.

Truffles can cost upwards of €500 to €1000 per kilogram, making them almost literally worth their weight in gold. The reason for the fluctuating prices, and the mystique surrounding truffles is their inability to be controlled by man alone. *Trufficulteur* Jean-François Tourrette explains:

'The truffles' price depends on the supply and the demand. The demand is always present but the supply, the annual production, depends on the weather. Critical points include spring's water excess, summer's dryness, autumn's water excess, winter's frost etc... According to these elements, as a professional *trufficulteur* I can evaluate if it will be a good, medium or bad season. So it is nature that fixes the general price, followed by the truffles' individual qualities.'

Many a truffle traded at Richerenches market ends up in a can at the world's largest truffle cannery, **Plantin** (☎ 04 90 46 41 44; www.plantin.com; rte de Nyons; ☎ 8am-noon & 1.30-5.30pm Mon-Fri), 7km northeast of Vaison-la-Romaine in Puymeras, where the fungus has been conserved in jars for year-round consumption since 1930. The cannery, which handles between 20 and 30 tonnes of truffles a year, is just west of Puymeras village on the D46/D938 junction.

In season, fresh truffles can also be picked up at general markets in Vaison-la-Romaine (Tuesday), Valréas (Wednesday), Nyons (Thursday) and Carpentras (Friday); and at the truffle-specialist shop in St-Rémy de Provence (p191), inspired by France's top truffle chef, Clément Bruno (see the boxed text, p360). Many restaurants throughout Provence specialise in truffles.

The history of truffles is unearthed in the **Maison de la Truffe et du Tricastin** (House of Truffles; ☎ 04 75 96 61 29; www.maisondelatruffe.com in French; adult/child €3.50/2; ☎ 3-7pm Mon, 9am-noon & 3-7pm Tue-Sat, 10am-noon & 3-7pm Sun Jun-Sep, 3-7pm Mon, 9am-noon & 2-6pm Tue-Sat Oct, Nov & Mar-May, 9am-noon & 2-6pm Tue-Sat, 10am-noon & 2-6pm Sun Dec-Feb), 14km west of Richerenches in St-Paul Troix Châteaux. The village celebrates a **Fête de la Truffe** on the second Sunday in February.

A comprehensive online information source for the region's truffles is www.truffle-and-truffe.com.

village is best known for its **Or Blanc** (white gold) – sweet Muscat wines best drunk young, chilled to 6°C or 8°C, which are the perfect partner for juicy Cavaillon melons (see the boxed text, p223). Shops stock it in town.

Nestled 7.5km southwest of Beaumes de Venise in Sarrians, reached by the D21 then the D52, the ecological farm **Domaine de l'Oiselet** (☎ 04 90 65 57 57; www.oiselet.com; Les Garrigues; programmes incl tastings adult/child from €10/5) regularly throws its gates open for visitors to experience farm life such as cherry-picking in May, and apricot-jam-making in July. Call to find out what's on when. You can also stock up on the farm's red wine made from its century-old vines.

Wines can also be tasted in **Gigondas** (population 648; elevation 282m), 12km northeast of Sarrians. Cellars cram the central square, place du Portail, from where rue du Corps de Garde climbs to Gigondas' ruined chateau, campanile, church and cemetery. Contemporary sculptures en route form **Le Cheminement de Sculptures**; ask for a map of the sculpture trail at the Gigondas tourist office.

Sleeping & Eating

Delicious dining is available at most places listed here.

CHAMBRES D'HÔTES

Many *mas* open their doors to *chambre d'hôte* guests; several are on the northbound D23 to Séguret.

Ferme Le Degoutaud (☎ 04 90 62 99 29; le.degoutaud@wanadoo.fr; rte de Malaucène; d incl breakfast €58-63; ☎ ☎ ☎) At this authentic working farm dating from the 16th century, you can cosy up in its three rooms (one of which is wheelchair accessible), or soak up the views from the panoramic pool before treating yourself to the tempting table d'hôte (€21). If you're looking to spend longer exploring the area, ask about the farm's self-catering cottages. Ferme Le Degoutaud is 5km north of Malaucène along the D90 to Suzette.

Les Abeilles (The Bees; ☎ 04 90 12 38 96; www.abeilles-sablet.com; 4 rue de Vaison, Sablet; d incl breakfast €60-90; midweek lunch menu €28, menus €38-50; ☎ lunch Tue-Sun, dinner Tue-Sat; ☎ ☎ ☎) The much-buzzed-about culinary whizzes Johannes and Marlies Sailer have tucked two sweet *chambre d'hôte* rooms above their wonderful restaurant mainly so that diners can indulge in duck breast roasted in honey and lavender, warm cherry soup, and

wonderful local wines without having to rush off. From October to April, one-day cooking courses (€110) include visiting local wine makers, wild herb gardens, markets and more.

Château Juvenal (☎ 04 90 62 31 76; www.chateau-en-provence.com; chemin du Long Serre, St-Hippolyte le Graveyron; d incl breakfast €95-160; ☎ ☎ ☎) Sprawled within tree-filled gardens amid an ecological wine- and olive-growing estate 5km west of Beaumes de Venise, just four meticulously decorated rooms make up this manor-house-style *chambre d'hôte*. Play billiards, splash in the swimming pool or curl up by the open fire. A table d'hôte (€28) is served on Tuesdays and Thursdays (reserve 48 hours ahead).

HOTELS

Hôtel Montmirail (☎ 04 90 65 84 01; www.hotelmontmirail.com; s/d from €56/77; ☎ mid-May-Oct; ☎ ☎) A 19th-century mansion in a remote spot midway between Gigondas and neighbouring Vacqueyras, the Hôtel Montmirail has a host of thoughtful little touches like dressing gowns

A PROVENÇAL CHRISTMAS

Provençal Christmas traditions endure as they have for centuries in the little golden-hued village of **Séguret** (population 892; elevation 250m).

Poised on a rocky outcrop 9km south of Vaison-la-Romaine like a star on a Christmas tree, the village opens its festivities at dusk on Christmas Eve with **Cacho Fio**. During this Provençal ceremony a log – usually cut from a pear, olive or cherry tree – is placed in the hearth, doused with fortified wine, blessed three times by the youngest and oldest family members, and then set alight. The fire must burn until the three kings arrive on 6 January.

Although many still celebrate *Cacho Fio* at home, it is only in Séguret that villagers gather to bless and burn a log together. This takes place in the Salle Delage, adjoining Chapelle Ste-Thecle on rue du Four. Later, locals wend their way up to Église St-Denis where, during Li Bergié, the Christmas nativity scene is brought to life with real-life shepherds, lambs and a baby in a manger. This *crèche vivante* (living crèche) is followed by midnight Mass in Provençal.

After Mass, families rush home for Caleno vo Careno (see p52).

as well as English and German TV channels. Full- and half-board options are available at the on-site restaurant, which spills onto a leafy outdoor terrace.

Le Mas de Magali (☎ 04 90 36 39 91; www.masdemagali.com; quartier Chante Coucou, Le Crestet; half-board per person €68-78; P ☎ ☎) Hidden amid flowers, oak trees and twittering birds, this haven of a hotel-restaurant has magical mountain views. Half-board options provide a fine excuse to dine on the seasonal Provençal cuisine at Magali's restaurant (*menu* €27; open for dinner Thursday to Tuesday), and you can borrow a mountain bike to explore the stunning countryside. Follow the signs from the bottom of the D76 leading up to Le Crestet village

Domaine de Cabasse (☎ 04 90 46 91 12; www.domaine-de-cabasse.fr; rte de Sablet, Séguret; d €98-135; ☎ mid-Mar–Oct; P ☎) Wine connoisseurs will appreciate this wine-producing estate on the plains, 800m south of Séguret village. In addition to 12 sunlit rooms, a pool and tennis courts, there are wines galore to taste from the barrel-lined cellar; best accompanied by taking up the option of half-board, with meals prepared from vegetables grown on the grounds.

HOSTEL & CAMPING

Gîte d'Étape des Dentelles de Gigondas (☎ 04 90 65 80 85; www.gite-dentelles.com in French; dm €12.50, d or tr per person without bathroom €14.50, sheets €3; ☎ Mar–Dec) Next to Gigondas' fire station, this clean, comfortable *gîte* (hostel) has two 13-bed dorms and a handful of two- and three-bed rooms. Join in on a hike or mountain-bike ride (from €9) or a climbing expedition (from €25).

There are several camp sites just north of Bédoin along the D974 east of Le Barroux.

MONT VENTOUX

Visible from as far away as Avignon, at 1909m, Mont Ventoux lords over northern Provence. From its summit, accessible by road between

A PICTURE-PERFECT DETOUR

Charge your camera batteries before driving or biking 9km along the wiggly D90 from Malaucène to Suzette to take in the twin-set view of Mont Ventoux (east) and the Dentelles de Montmirail unfolding from the Col de la Chaîne (472m), 4km west, and the Col de Suzette (392m), a further 3km.

May and October, vistas extend to the southern Alps and – on a clear day – as far as the Pyrenees.

Unique species including the snake eagle and an assortment of spiders and butterflies are only found on this isolated peak that marks the divide between northern and southern France's flora and fauna. Shipbuilding in the 17th century felled much of its forests, but since the 1860s reforested tree types such as cedar create a crackling autumnal kaleidoscope of red, yellow and golden brown.

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 mistral blows here 130 days a year on average, with winds recorded of up to 300km/h. Bring warm clothes and rain gear, even in summer. Snow blankets the areas above 1300m from December to April; in summer it appears snowcapped because of the *lauzes* (broken white stones) covering the top.

Since 1990 the mountain and its environs have been protected by Unesco's Réserve de Biosphère du Mont Ventoux (Mont Ventoux Biosphere Reserve).

Near the southwestern end of the Mont Ventoux massif is the agricultural village of **Bédoin** (population 2657; elevation 295m) and, 4km further east along rte du Mont Ventoux (D974), neighbouring **Ste-Colombe**. Road signs here tell you if the *col* (mountain pass) over the summit is closed.

At the eastern end of the Mont Ventoux massif, the sweet stone village of **Sault** (population 1190; elevation 800m) has sweeping summertime views over the carpet of purple lavender laid out below. In the village, pop into **André Boyer** (☎ 04 90 64 00 23; place de l'Europe) to stock up on lavender honey and almond nougat made by the family since 1887, and to arrange a factory visit. Sault's tourist office has a list of other **artisan industries** throughout the area, which often take visitors behind the scenes.

Information

INTERNET RESOURCES

Destination Ventoux (www.destination-ventoux.com) Comprehensive information on the region.

MAB France (www.mab-france.org) Follow the links to the Réserve de Biosphère du Mont Ventoux.

Mont Ventoux (www.lumontventoux.net in French) Walking and cycling information.

TOURIST INFORMATION

Bédoin tourist office (☎ 04 90 65 63 95; www.bedoin.org; place du Marché; ☎ 9am–12.30pm & 2–6pm Mon–Sat, 9.30am–12.30pm Sun mid-Jun–Aug, 9am–12.30pm & 2–6pm Mon, Tue, Thu & Fri, 9am–12.30pm & 2–5pm Wed, 9.30am–12.30pm Sat rest of year) The meeting point for summertime walks (€6) and children's workshops (€5) run by the Office National des Forêts (ONF; National Forests Office) for the responsible appreciation of the surrounding cedar forest.

Sault tourist office (☎ 04 90 64 01 21; www.saultenprovence.com; av de la Promenade; ☎ 9am–12.30pm & 2–6.30pm Mon–Sat, 9.30am–12.30pm Sun Jul–Aug, 9am–noon & 2–4pm or 5pm Mon–Sat Sep–Apr) Also a good resource for the Gorges de la Nesque (p188).

Activities

CYCLING

In summer cyclists labour up the sun-baked slopes of Mont Ventoux. Tourist offices distribute *Massif du Mont Ventoux: 9 Itinéraires VTT*, a free booklet detailing nine mountain-bike itineraries ranging from an easy 3.9km (one hour) to a gruelling 56.7km (seven to eight hours) tour of Mont Ventoux.

In Sault, **Albion Cycles** (☎ 04 90 64 09 32; christophe.achard@cegetel.net; rte de St-Trinit; ☎ 9am–12.30pm & 2–7pm Mon–Sat, 9am–12.30pm Sun Jul & Aug, 9am–noon & 3–6.30pm Tue–Sat Sep–Jun) rents bikes for €7.50 to €18 per day, and can arrange to pick them up and drop them off within a 30km radius. **Bédoin Location** (☎ 04 90 65 94 53; www.bedoin-location.com; chemin de la Ferraille) just near Bédoin's tourist office rents road and mountain bikes starting from €14 per half-day (if you've worked up an appetite by the time you get back, it also runs an on-site pizzeria). Both can suggest cycling routes.

FLYING

View the region's most legendary mountain from on high with **Air Ventoux** (☎ 04 90 66 35 81; monsieur.wanadoo.fr/airventoux in French). Half-hour flights (adult/child under 12 years €72/36; minimum two passengers) take off from airstrips in Montfavet (near Avignon) and Pernes-les-Fontaines (near Carpentras).

QUADING

Ventoux Quad (☎ 06 19 06 05 92; www.ventoux-quad.com in French; rte de la Madeleine; 1hr/half day/full day €50/90/150) is a quad-hire place in Crillon-le-Brave that organises one-day and weekend quading adventures around Ventoux.

SKIING

December to March, locals ski Ventoux's slopes. **Chalet Reynard** (☎ 04 90 61 84 55; www.chalet-reynard.com in French), at the intersection of the D974 and the eastbound D164 to Sault, is a small ski station (1440m) on the southern slopes. Two *téléskis* (drag lifts) serve two blue runs. A full-day pass costs around €15 and you can hire skis, boots and poles for the same price again per half-/full day. Cross-country skiing is also popular and there is a lone nonskier can bomb down.

Station de Mont Serein (1400m; www.stationdu montserein.com), 5km west of the summit on the colder northern side, is the main ski station with 12km of downhill pistes served by eight drag lifts. Skis, ski schools, piste maps and ski passes (per afternoon/day €12/15.10) are available from the **Chalet d'Accueil** (☎ 04 90 63 42 02; adpm@infonie.fr), in the resort centre. **Chalet Liotard** is a midstation, 100m further uphill.

TROUT FISHING

Maurice Paris (☎ 04 75 28 07 66; ☎ Sat & Sun Apr–Jun & Sep, daily Jul & Aug) arranges family-friendly trout fishing including rod rental and bait (by reservation only). Prices depend on the weight of the fish caught.

WALKING

Running from the River Ardèche west, 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 (p234). Continuing on the GR9 takes you across the Monts du Vaucluse and Luberon Range. See p88 for more details.

Bédoin, Sault and Malaucène tourist offices have information on exploring Mont Ventoux on foot, including night-time expeditions up the mountain in July and August (€14; over 15 years only) to watch the celestial sunrise.

The website www.lumontventoux.net (in French) details three walks and 20 cycling routes around Ventoux.

Find out about flora and fauna at Sault's **Centre de Découverte de la Nature** (Nature Discovery Centre; ☎ 04 90 64 13 96; av de l'Oratoire; adult/under 8yr €3/free; ☎ 10am–noon & 2–6pm Mon–Fri Sep–Jun, 10am–noon & 3–7pm Tue–Sun Jul & Aug).

Sleeping & Eating

Places listed under the Dentelles de Montmirail (p179) are also handy for exploring Mont Ventoux.

La Bastide des Bourguets (☎ 04 90 64 11 90; www.bastidedesbourguets.com in French; Les Bourguets, Sault; d incl breakfast €55, gîte per weekend from €148; P) Four floral French-washed rooms (poppy, olive, sunflower and lavender), and a two-bedroom gîte are at home amid Sault's lavender fields in this beautiful 19th-century *bastide*, which also serves up a laden table d'hôte (€20) on Monday, Wednesday and Friday by reservation.

La Maison (☎ 04 90 65 15 50; Beaumont du Ventoux; d €60-70; ☞ Mar-Oct; P ☒) This stone house with blue shutters is no longer a restaurant – Michèle Laurelut now concentrates her talents solely on running this charming abode as an intimate *chambre d'hôte*, so the only way to taste her exceptional cooking is at breakfast (€10) with a feast in the courtyard beneath the linden trees.

Hostellerie du Val de Sault (☎ 04 90 64 01 41; www.valdesault.com; rte de St-Trinit; half-board per person from €114; ☞ Mar-early Nov; P ☒ ☞) 'Gourmet stays' is the elaborate but accurate description of the half-board options at this haven of peace, situated 2km north of Sault along the D950 to Banon. Dine on *menus* (from €37 to €49) such as 'lavender flowers' and 'homage to truffles', then luxuriate in the bubbling Jacuzzi while looking out over Mont Ventoux or swim in the heated pool. It's worth dropping by the restaurant (which is open for lunch and dinner) even if you're not ensconced in one of the whisper-quiet rooms or suites.

Getting There & Away

Mont Ventoux is 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 p185.

PLATEAU D'ALBION

Until around a decade ago, this uninhabitable moonscape was shrouded in security as the site of France's land-based nuclear missiles, stationed here since 1965. In 1996 President Jacques Chirac ordered the missiles to be deactivated and the military site to be manned by the French Foreign Legion. The last nuclear missile and concrete silo was dismantled in 1998.

France's former biggest secret is riddled with natural potholes and caverns. The plain can be uncovered – above- or belowground – with the **Association Spéléologique du Plateau d'Albion** (☎ 04 90 76 08 33; www.aspanet.net in French; 2 rue de l'Église), a spelunking club in the plain's only real village, **St-Christol d'Albion** (population 555; elevation 850m), 11km south of Sault. Spelunking starts at €60 per day; the association also arranges hikes and mountain-biking expeditions. Basic accommodation (€10/5/25 for dorm bed/breakfast/half-board plus €3.50 for sheets) is available in the club's *refuge* (hut).

CARPENTRAS

pop 27,249 / elev 102m

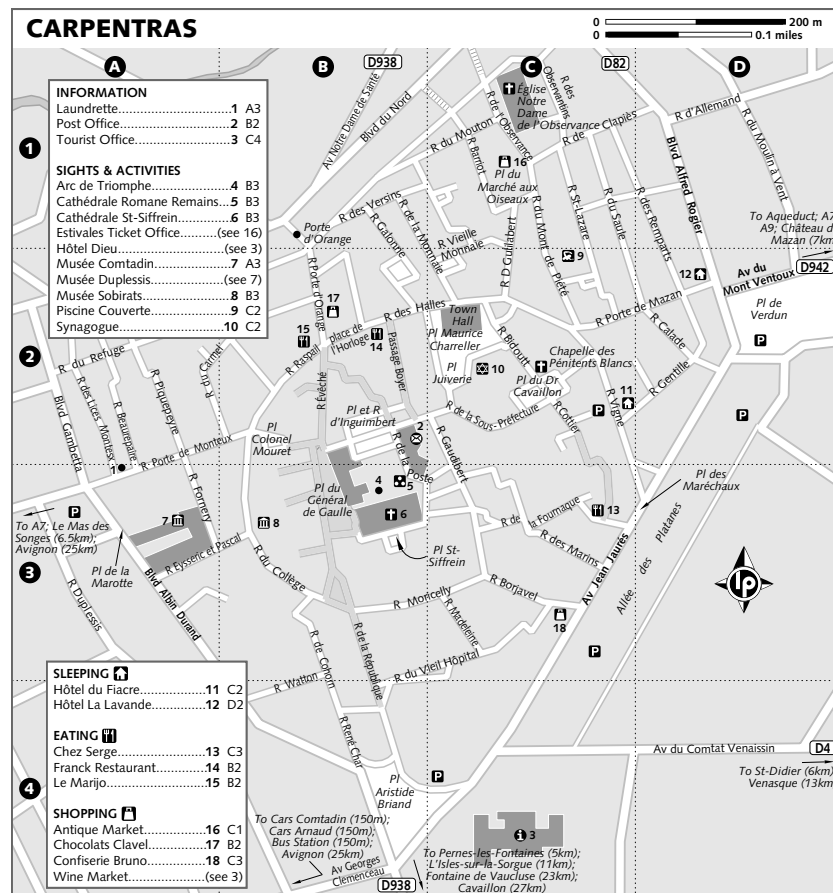
If you can, plan to be in Carpentras on a Friday morning, when the streets spill over with more than 350 stalls laden with breads, honeys, cheeses, olives, nuts, fruits (especially the area's juicy blood-red strawberries), brittle almond nougat, *nougatelles* (like the nougat but finely crushed), and a rainbow of *berlingots* (Carpentras' striped, pillow-shaped hard-boiled sweets). During winter, there's also a truffle market.

Carpentras' mouthwatering markets aside, this charming agricultural town equidistant from Avignon 25km to the southwest and Orange to the northwest has a handful of architectural treats too. A Greek trading centre and later a Gallo-Roman city, Carpentras 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 who had been expelled from French crown territory took refuge in the Comtat Venaissin under papal protection. The 14th-century synagogue is the oldest still 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, where you'll find the tourist office. From here, the pedestrian-only rue de la République, which heads due north, takes you to the 17th-century Palais de Justice and the cathedral. The town hall is a few blocks northeast of the cathedral.



Information

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

Laundrette (118 rue Porte de Montoux; ☞ 7am-8pm)

Post office (65 rue d'Inguibert)

Tourist office (☎ 04 90 63 00 78; www.tourisme.fr/carpentras; place Aristide Briand; ☞ 9am-7pm Mon-Sat, 9.30am-1pm Sun Jul & Aug, 9.30am-12.30pm & 2-6pm Mon-Sat Sep-Jun) Sells regional maps and guides, and hands out a free English-language *Discovery Circuit* brochure, corresponding with a walking circuit of signposts marked with *berlingots*.

Sights & Activities

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) was founded here in 1367. Rebuilt between 1741 and 1743 and restored in 1929 and 1954, on the 1st-floor wood-panelled sanctuary you can see 18th-century liturgical objects; below, there's an oven used until 1904 to bake *matzo*, Passover's unleavened bread. It's inconspicuously situated opposite the town hall; look for the stone plaque inscribed with Hebrew letters.

CATHÉDRALE ST-SIFFREIN

Église St-Siffrein, once Carpentras' **cathedral** (☞ 10am-noon & 2-6pm Tue-Sat), 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) holding precious 14th- to 19th-century religious relics is now salted away from the public except during the Fête de St-Siffrein (right).

ARC DE TRIOMPHE & AQUEDUCT

Hidden in a corner off rue d'Inguibert – next to the cathedral and behind the Palais de Justice in an episcopal palace built in 1801 – what's left of this **triumphal arch** is the town's only Roman relic, built under Augustus in the 1st century AD. On the opposite side of the square are the remains of a 7th-century **Cathédrale Romane**, predominantly destroyed in 1399.

Carpentras' northern outskirts are crossed by the remains of a 10km-long **aqueduct** that supplied water to the city between 1745 and 1893. For a heady glimpse of all 48 arches, follow the signs to Orange from the centre.

MUSEUMS

Carpentras' museums open 10am to noon and 2pm to 4pm (to 6pm April to September) Wednesday to Monday. Admission is €2.

Musée Comtadin (243 blvd Albin Durand), which displays artefacts related to local history and folklore, and **Musée Duplessis** (243 blvd Albin Durand), with paintings from the personal collection of Monseigneur d'Inguibert, are on the western side of the old city.

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

Behind the tourist office, the 18th-century former hospital in the **Hôtel Dieu** (place Aristide Briand; ☎ by arrangement with tourist office) has an incredibly preserved **pharmacy** and a **chapel**. Guided tours in English run at 3.30pm on Wednesday between June and late September (€4).

SWIMMING

Art Deco fans can dive into the 1930-built, geometric **piscine couverte** (covered swimming pool; ☎ 04 90 60 92 03; rue du Mont de Piété; adult/3-15yr €2/1.50; ☎ in-season hr vary, closed end Jun–mid-Sep). Built by the Caisse d'Épargne in 1930 it has a water temperature of 20°C; but, unfathomably, it's closed in summer.

Tours

The tourist office organises fabulous tours costing between €3 and €10, including city tours, nature treks, *berlingot* factory tours (free), wine-

tasting workshops, truffle hunts and farm trips. Book at least 24 hours in advance.

Festivals & Events

Carpentras hosts a two-week music, dance and theatre festival, **Estivales** (☎ ticket office 04 90 60 46 00; estivales@ville-carpentras.fr; 4 place aux Marché aux Oiseaux), in open-air venues in July. The town has a wonderful **Jewish music festival** from late July to early August. The **Fête de St-Siffrein** (Feast of St Siffrein) on 27 November marks the opening of the truffle season.

Sleeping & Eating

Hôtel La Lavande (☎ 04 90 63 13 49; 282 blvd Alfred Rogier; d €30-40) La Lavande has nine cheerful, cheap-as-frites, frill-free rooms (the cheapest have shared bathrooms), accessed by staircases running between the floors at random angles. There's a bustling, old-fashioned restaurant (*menus* €11 to €15) dishing up home cooking and good deals on half-board. It's on the left just past the intersection of rue Porte de Mazan.

Hôtel du Fiacre (☎ 04 90 63 03 15; www.hotel-du-fiacre.com; 153 rue Vigne; d €62-90; ☎ ☎) The genuine warmth of the welcome at this family-owned hotel is like staying with favourite relatives. Set around a central walled stone courtyard in a beautifully restored 18th-century mansion, its 18 rooms are furnished with floral quilts, canopied beds, antiques and original art. All have TVs (including BBC). Parking costs €5.

Château de Mazan (☎ 04 90 69 62 61; www.chateaudemazan.fr; place Napoléon; d €95-270, ste €320-400; ☎ Mar-Dec; ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) This magnificent castle 7km east of Carpentras in Mazan belonged to the Marquis de Sade in the 18th century. Today it houses 30 regal rooms and suites in an orchard of colours. Gastronomic bliss is dished up at the refined restaurant, l'Ingénue (*menus* €35 to €75; closed Tuesday in summer and Monday and Tuesday in winter). Chef Iris Enrich also whets young appetites with a gourmet children's *menu* (€27.50). Parking is free.

Le Mas des Songes (☎ 04 90 65 49 20; www.masdesonges.com in French; 1631 impasse du Perrusier; d €140-180; ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) This stunning five-room *maison d'hôte* has contemporary flair – lots of light and air – and breathtaking views from the pool. Prices include afternoon tea. Breakfast is an extra €6 and there are regular *tables d'hôtes* (€30 to €40). Find it 6.5km west of Carpentras in the truffle land of Montoux.

Le Marjio (☎ 04 90 60 42 65; 73 rue Raspail; mains €14.50-16.50; ☎ ☎ lunch & dinner Mon-Fri, dinner Sat, lunch Sun)

Behind green timber-framed windows, this local favourite has rich regional fare like goats cheese marinated for 15 days in herbs and olive oil. Proof just how sweet a tooth Carpentras has, the list of desserts, like nougat and honey ice cream, runs longer than the choice of mains.

Chez Serge (☎ 04 90 63 21 24; 90 rue Cottier; lunch menus from €15, dinner menus from €27.50; ☎ ☎ lunch & dinner Mon-Sat; ☎ ☎) Paris meets Provence by way of Armenia at this legendary bistro where Serge serves up culinary creations like cider-braised salmon and honey-glazed duck, and pizzas (also available to take away) piled high with wood-oven-grilled garlic, olive oil and herbs. There's a well-priced children's *menu* (€6.60), as well as a truffle *menu* (€35).

Franck Restaurant (☎ 04 90 60 75 00; 30 place de l'Horloge; lunch menus from €20, dinner menus from €26.50; ☎ ☎ lunch & dinner Thu-Mon) Flanked by a sophisticated, low-lit bar area, this newly opened burgundy-and-stone dining room opening to an elegant white-tableclothed terrace is frequented by those in the know for Franck's seasonal gastronomic cooking, including a heavenly truffle *menu* (€92).

Shopping MARKETS

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

In winter, Carpentras' 'black diamonds' (see the boxed text, p178) 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. In July and August, drop by the wine market outside the tourist office.

Treasures are jumbled among the trash at the **antique market** (place du Marché aux Oiseaux; ☎ 8am-noon Fri Apr-Oct).

SWEET SHOPS

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

Berlingots have been available from **Confiserie Bruno** (☎ 04 90 63 04 99; www.confiseriebono.fr; 280 allée Jean Jaurès) since 1925.

Getting There & Away

The train station is served by goods trains only, so buses operated by Cars Comtadins and Cars Arnaud provide Carpentras' only intercity

public transport. The **bus station** (place Terradou) is 150m southwest of place Aristide Briand.

Schedules are available from **Cars Comtadins** (☎ 04 90 67 20 25; 192 av Clemenceau) across the square and from **Cars Arnaud** (☎ 04 90 63 01 82; 8 av Victor Hugo).

There are hourly services to Avignon (€4.20, 45 minutes) and infrequent runs to Vaison-la-Romaine (€4.30, 45 minutes) via Malucène and Bédoin (€3.40, 40 minutes) at the southwest foot of Mont Ventoux, Cavailon (€5.10, 45 minutes) and L'Isle-sur-Sorgue (€3.70, 20 minutes), 7km west of Fontaine de Vaucluse.

AROUND CARPENTRAS

Water, water everywhere. See the itinerary, p156, for a day trip through this water-filled wonderland.

Pernes-les-Fontaines

pop 10,309

A former capital of the Comtat Venaissin, Pernes-les-Fontaines, 5km south of Carpentras, is named for the 40 fountains that spring from its stone walls and squares. Upon the discovery of the Font de Bouvery source in the 18th century, the mayor furnished the town with monumental fountains like the grandiose, moss-covered **Fontaine du Cormoran**, **Fontaine Reboul** and **Fontaine du Gigot**. Pick up a free fountain map at the **tourist office** (☎ 04 90 61 31 04; www.ville-pernes-les-fontaines.fr in French; place Gabriel Moutte; ☎ 9am-12.30pm & 2.30-7pm Mon-Fri, 9am-12.30pm & 2.30-6pm Sat Jul & Aug, 9am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Sat May, Jun, Sep & Oct, 9am-noon & 2-5pm Mon-Sat Nov-Apr).

Le Mas des Abricotiers (☎ 04 90 66 19 16; www.bleu-provence.com; 193 chemin des Terres Mortes, St-Didier; d incl breakfast €63-98; ☎ ☎ call for winter opening information; ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎), an 18th-century 'apricot farm' 5km east of Pernes-les-Fontaines, creates the prettiest of Provençal scenes with its warm apricot-coloured walls, cooling wooden shutters and flowerbeds framing the pool. There's a two-night minimum stay. An apartment is also available starting from €450 per week for two people.

At **Mas La Bonoty** (☎ 04 90 61 61 09; www.bonoty.com; chemin de la Bonoty, Pernes-les-Fontaines; d incl breakfast €72-90; ☎ ☎ closed Jan–mid-Feb; ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) rooms named after the flowers that fill the gardens are light-filled and lovely. This farmhouse hotel also has an appealing Provençal restaurant (*menus* €22 to €55). In cooler weather, there's a stone-and-wood dining room; in summer, dine under the cool, fragrant pine trees.

Scoot around Pernes-les-Fontaines on a bike rented from **Vélo & Oxygène** (☎ 04 90 61 37 37; 284 rue Émile Zola).

L'Isle-sur-la-Sorgue

pop 18,000

Creaking wooden water wheels trailing strands of moss churn the waterways encircling L'Isle-sur-la-Sorgue's ancient old town.

L'Isle, 11km south of Pernes-les-Fontaines, dates from the 12th century, when fishermen, who harpooned their catch from flat-bottomed gondola-like boats, built huts on stilts above what was then a marsh. By the 18th century canals ploughed by giant wheels (17 of which still turn today) powered thriving paper mills and silk factories. Since the latter half of last century, bustling antiques villages have seen a further resurgence of the town's prosperity.

Scattered around the edges of the canals, car parks allow the narrow laneways meandering through the historic centre to remain largely vehicle-free.

INFORMATION

Maghreb Taxi Phone (☎ 04 90 20 03 28; 3 rue

Danton; per hr €3; ☎ 9am-1pm & 3-10pm Mon-Sat, 9am-10pm Sun) Internet access.

Tourist office (☎ 04 90 38 04 78; www.oti-delasorgue.fr; place de la Liberté; ☎ 9am-12.30pm or 1pm & 2pm or 2.30-6pm or 6.30pm Mon-Sat, 9.30am-12.30pm or 1pm Sun) In the centre of the old town.

SIGHTS

Graced by a lunar calendar on its façade, the **Collegiale Notre Dame des Anges** (Our Lady of Angels; place de la Liberté; ☎ 10am-noon & 3-6pm daily Jul-Sep, 10am-noon & 3-5pm Tue-Sat Oct-Jun) has a spectacular baroque interior with the heads of no less than 222 angels, and a magnificent 1648-built organ (the real one is on the left as you face the altar; opposite, a faux organ is purely for symmetry).

Museums include the quaint **Musée du Jouet & de la Poupée Ancienne** (Ancient Toy & Doll Museum; ☎ 04 90 20 97 31; 26 rue Carnot; adult/child €3.50/1.50; ☎ 10am-6.30pm Tue-Sun, call for winter opening times); and one dedicated to native poet René Char (1907-88), housed in the 18th-century private mansion, the **Hôtel Donadèi de Campredon** (☎ 04 90 38 17 41; 20 rue du Docteur Tallet; adult/child €6/5; ☎ 10am-12.30pm & 2-5.30pm Tue-Sun), which also mounts temporary exhibitions.

The tourist office has details about following in the footsteps of the town's **former Jewish community**, which lived here under papal

protection from the 14th century until the French Revolution.

About 1km west of the old town towards Fontaine de Vaucluse, the River Sorgue splits in two at the **partage des eaux** (parting of the waters) – a serene spot for watching wildlife like kingfishers, beavers and herons. There are cafés with views of the water.

ANTIQUES & ART

Disused factories along the town's southern quays contain 10 **antiques villages** (☎ 10am-6pm Sat-Mon), which between them house hundreds of antiques dealers and traders. Bargains are a better bet at the two giant four-day **antiques fairs** held in August and over Easter.

Artists galleries – nine to date – proliferate throughout the old town.

SLEEPING & EATING

Moulin Font de Capelle (☎ 04 90 02 39 01; www.moulindecapelle.com; place St-Roch, Le Thor; d incl breakfast €70-85; ☎ Mar-mid-Dec; P) Should you be arriving by canoe, you can pull up right at the dock of this *chambre d'hôte* housed in a restored old mill in the little village of Le Thor, 5km west of L'Isle-sur-la-Sorgue. The mill's three rooms are unpretentiously but appealingly themed 'Provençal', 'Moroccan' and 'Romantic'. Breakfast is served on the riverside terrace; and you can swim or fish in the Sorgue. Parking is free.

La Prévôté (☎ 04 90 38 57 29; http://laprevote.site.voila.fr in French; 4bis rue Jean-Jacques Rousseau; d incl breakfast €90-170; menus €25-60; ☎ closed late Feb-early Mar & mid-Nov-early Dec; ☎) Straddling a burbling waterway in L'Isle-sur-la-Sorgue's old town, this *chambre d'hôte*, pretty as a box of chocolates, has five rich, chocolaty toned rooms, and a spa, Jacuzzi and solarium on the roof. It's an easy amble downstairs to one of the region's finest gastronomic restaurants (closed Tuesday in August, plus Wednesday from September to July), where chef Jean-Paul Alloin concocts fare like foie gras ravioli and thyme and rosemary chocolate accompanied by pear sorbet.

La Maison dur la Sorgue (☎ 04 90 20 74 86; www.lamaisonsurlasorgue.com; 6 rue Rose Goudard; d incl breakfast €180-230; P ☎ ☎) A beautiful 17th-century private mansion is today this luxurious *chambre d'hôte* in L'Isle-sur-la-Sorgue's charming old town, accessed via a glassed-in interior courtyard. Start your day with breakfast beneath a sycamore tree, and spend the evening snuggled up in the cherry red lounge room before the roaring open fire. Ask hosts Marie-Claude and

Frédéric to let you in on the mansion's intriguing history. Parking costs €10 by reservation.

In-town dining includes sun-kissed southern flavours at **Le Paradis de la Sorgue** (☎ 04 90 21 15 78; La Distillerie, 53 rte de Carpentras; lunch menus €10-12.50, dinner menus €18-25; ☎ lunch Tue-Sun, dinner Tue-Sat); and gastronomic delights like smoked eel with glazed apple or roasted rabbit with artichoke ravioli at **Le Vivier** (☎ 04 90 38 52 80; 800 cours Fernande Peyre; menus from €28; ☎ lunch Tue-Fri & Sun, dinner Tue-Sat).

GETTING THERE & AROUND

L'Isle-sur-la-Sorgue train station is not served by passenger trains.

From Avignon **Voyages Arnaud** (☎ 04 90 38 15 58) runs buses to/from L'Isle-sur-la-Sorgue (€3.50, 40 minutes, three to four daily), and between Carpentras and L'Isle-sur-la-Sorgue (20 minutes).

Watch out if you're driving: L'Isle-sur-la-Sorgue is easily confused with the entirely separate, uninspiring town of Sorgues.

For bike hire try **Christophe Tendil** (☎ 04 90 38 19 12; 10 av Julien Guigue; per day adult/child €14/10; ☎ closed Sun & Mon).

Gliding 8km of waterways by canoe is the most peaceful way to reach L'Isle-sur-la-Sorgue from Fontaine de Vaucluse (see p188). **Canoe Kayak** (☎ 04 90 38 33 22; adult/child €18/10) runs two-hour trips that include a bus ride to Fontaine before canoeing back to L'Isle-sur-la-Sorgue.

Fontaine de Vaucluse

pop 661

All of the rain that falls around Apt, as well as melting snow, gushes out here in Fontaine de Vaucluse (Vau-Cluso La Font in Provençal), 7km east of L'Isle. The world's fifth most powerful spring – and France's most powerful – Fontaine (meaning fountain) is where the River Sorgue surges surfaceward from its subterranean course. Jacques Cousteau was one of many who attempted unsuccessfully to plumb the spring's depths before an unmanned submarine touched base (315m down) in 1985. It's at its most dazzling after heavy rain, when the water is an azure, almost violet, blue.

The spring's crystalline waters flow through the pretty village of Fontaine de Vaucluse about 1km downstream...as do the 1.5 million or more tourists that pour through here each year. Aim to arrive early in the morning before the trickle of visitors becomes a deluge.

INFORMATION

Tourist office (☎ 04 90 20 32 22; www.oti-delasorgue.fr; chemin de la Fontaine; ☎ 9.30am-5.30pm Tue-Sat) South-east of central place de la Colonne on the way to the spring.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Most visitors, of course, come to see the spring, but this tiny village also has an eclectic collection of museums including the **Musée d'Histoire 1939-1945** (☎ 04 90 20 24 00; adult/child €3.50/1.50; ☎ 10am-noon & 2-6pm Sat & Sun Mar, 10am-noon & 2-6pm Wed-Mon Apr-Jun, 10am-7pm Wed-Mon Jul & Aug, 10am-noon & 2-6pm Wed-Mon Sep & Oct, 10am-noon & 2-5pm Sat & Sun Nov & Dec), which showcases the Resistance movement during WWII.

Beautiful flower-encrusted paper made as it was in the 16th century is sold in the adjoining boutique and art gallery of the reconstructed **Moulin à Papier** (paper mill; ☎ 04 90 20 34 14; chemin de la Fontaine; admission free; ☎ 9am-12.30pm & 2-5pm Mon-Sat, 10.30am-12.30pm & 2-5pm Sun Sep-Jun, 9am-7pm Jul & Aug) on the river.

Musée Pétrarque (☎ 04 90 20 37 20; admission €3.50; ☎ 10am-noon & 2-6pm Wed-Mon Apr-Sep, 10am-noon & 2-5pm Oct) is devoted to the Italian Renaissance poet Petrarch, who lived in Fontaine de Vaucluse from 1337 to 1353, expressing in verse his futile love for Laura, wife of Hugues de Sade.

Midway between Fontaine and Lagnes on the D24, **Passerelles des Cimes** (☎ 04 90 38 56 87; adult/child from €18/12; ☎ 9am-6pm Jul-Aug, Sat & Sun Mar-Jun, Sep & Oct) is an adventure park filled with rope courses through the trees. You'll need to reserve ahead.

SLEEPING & EATING

L'Isle-sur-la-Sorgue (opposite) makes a good alternative base for visiting Fontaine. Restaurants are sprinkled around Fontaine.

Auberge de Jeunesse (☎ 04 90 20 31 65; fax 04 90 20 26 20; Chemin de la Vignasse; dm €11; ☎ reception 8-10am & 5.30-9pm, closed mid-Nov-Jan) In a lovely old farmhouse south of Fontaine de Vaucluse in the direction of Lagnes, this peaceful hostel is popular with families and hikers. From the bus stop, walk 800m uphill.

Hôtel du Poète (☎ 04 90 20 34 05; www.hoteldupoete.com; r €70-240; ☎ closed late Dec-mid-Feb; ☎) On the right-hand side of the road as you enter the village, on the riverbank, the peach-tinged Hôtel du Poète has 23 lyrically categorised rooms like 'melody' and 'symphony' with creamy furnishings, a poolside terrace to feast on fresh fruit at breakfast (€17), and can recommend nearby dining options.

Les Sources (☎ 04 90 20 31 84; rte de Cavailon; menus €22-35; ☺ lunch Tue-Sun, dinner daily early Apr-mid-Nov) Regional cuisine is at its freshest from Les Sources, an almond-coloured place with sage green shutters flanked by potted palms.

GETTING THERE & AROUND

Fontaine de Vaucluse is 21km southeast of Carpentras and 7km east of L'Isle-sur-Sorgue. From Avignon, **Cars Arnaud** (☎ 04 90 82 07 35) has a bus (€4.60, 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. (Don't duck down the little lane opposite the pay parking area instead – it dead-ends with nowhere to turn around, and reversing out is tricky. Trust us, we tried.)

Canoe companies operating guided tours along the river to L'Isle-sur-la-Sorgue include **Canoe Évasion** (☎ 04 90 38 26 22; rte de Fontaine de Vaucluse; ☺ late Apr-early Nov), next to Camping de la Coutelière on the D24 from Fontaine de Vaucluse towards Lagnes, with an on-site picnic area. **Kayak Vert** (☎ 04 90 20 35 44; www.kanoefrance.com; ☺ late Apr-Oct) in Fontaine de Vaucluse also rent canoes and organises river expeditions. A canoe or kayak with guide costs €17 to €18 per person.

Pays de Venasque

The hilltop villages around **Venasque** (population 980; elevation 320m), 13km southeast of Carpentras, form the seldom-explored yet beautiful 'Venasque Country'. The Venasque **tourist office** (☎ 04 90 66 11 66; www.venasque.fr; Grande Rue; ☺ 10am-12.30pm & 3-7pm Mon, Tue, Thu & Fri, 3-7pm Wed Jul & Aug, 10am-noon & 2-6pm Mon, Tue, Thu & Fri, 2-6pm Wed Apr-Jun, Sep & Oct, closed Oct-Mar) has information on the entire area.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

On an exposed rocky spur at the mercy of the elements, when the winter mistral blows through the village of Venasque, it *howls*. Weathering the winds, Venasque's ancient **baptistry** (☎ 04 90 66 62 01; adult/under 12yr €3/free; ☺ 9.15am-noon & 1-5pm or 6pm Jan-mid-Dec), built in the 5th century on the site of a Roman temple, is one of France's oldest structures. At Le Mas des Lavandes (right), be spellbound during a guided stroll (adult/child €6/3) along an **ethnobotanical walking trail**, listening to stories of the plants' magical powers.

The fortress village of **Le Beaucet** (population 354; elevation 300m) perches 6km south

via the winding D314. Two kilometres south along chemin des Oratoires (the D39A) in the hamlet of **St-Gens** is a small Romanesque basilica, rebuilt in 1884. The hermit Gens, who lived with wolves and performed rain-making miracles, died here in 1127.

The **Forêt de Vénasque**, crossed by the GR91 walking trail, lies to the east of Venasque. Heading across the Col de Murs (627m) mountain pass to the pretty village of **Murs** (population 420), 5km east, you can see remains of **Le Mur de la Peste** (plague wall).

Continuing north, the GR91 leads to the steep **Gorges de la Nesque**, from where Sault and the eastern edges of the Ventoux can be accessed. Frédéric Mistral described its ruggedness as a 'dark anfractuouse gorge'. Deep in the canyon, built into a rock shelter, is a 12th-century chapel restored in 1643. On the **Col des Abeilles**, north of the gorges on the D1, you can hire a donkey to accompany you along the gorges or up Mont Ventoux at **Les Ânes des Abeilles** (☎ 04 90 64 01 52; anesdesabeilles@wanadoo.fr; Col des Abeilles). Donkeys carry up to 40kg and amble along at 3km to 4km an hour; a day/weekend costs €40/80. Sault's tourist office is also a fount of information on the gorge.

SLEEPING & EATING

Les Oliviers Venasque (☎ 06 18 11 32 03, 04 90 66 03 71; www.lesoliviersvenasque.com; Grand rue; d incl breakfast €50-68; ☐) The family farm of **trufficulteur** Jean-François Tourrette (p42), this sweet *chambre d'hôte* has three sun-filled guest rooms with checked bedspreads and a lovely, leafy garden to enjoy breakfast while listening to the birds.

Auberge La Fontaine (☎ 04 90 66 02 96; www.auberge-lafontaine.com; place de la Fontaine, Venasque; d €125; menu €38; ☐ ☺) In the heart of the village, this ivy-draped stone inn runs regular intensive three-day cooking courses (€80 per person per day including lunch) and occasional, ambient concerts. Wild asparagus, truffles, locally picked raspberries, and herb-fed rabbit feature at the restaurant (open for dinner Thursday to Tuesday). Parking is free.

Le Mas des Lavandes (☎ 04 90 66 00 58; www.mas-des-lavandes.com in French; Fonnsargoule; gîte per week €305-500; ☺ closed Jan-Mar; ☐ ☺) Each of these two light, airy, self-catering *gîtes* sleeps up to seven people, with cheaper rates for weekends and midweek stays outside June to September. The *mas* is on the edge of Venasque, on the left as you follow the signs south to Le Beaucet.

LES ALPILLES

Strung between the Rivers Durance and Rhône, south of Avignon, the silvery Chaîne des Alpilles is a chain of limestone rocks glinting with heady herbal garrigue and olive groves. St-Rémy de Provence to the north and Maussane-les-Alpilles to the south are linked by the Vallée des Baux where AOC olive oil (p45) is milled.

Les Alpilles' ridge is traversed by the GR6 walking path.

ST-RÉMY DE PROVENCE

pop 10,007

Foodies flock to this chic town in the Alpilles, which has exceptional olive oil, celebrated chefs and one of France's best chocolate makers in its fold, as well as some exquisite places to sleep.

Before St-Rémy garnered gourmants, the Greeks then the Romans inhabited the settlement of Glanum on the city's southern edge, which remains a rich archaeological site. Centuries on, the philosopher Nostradamus (1503-66) was born in a house on rue Hoche. Van Gogh painted some of his best-known works

between 1889 and 1890 while hospitalised here. And for all its flair, St-Rémy's inherent charm remains rooted in age-old traditions.

Information

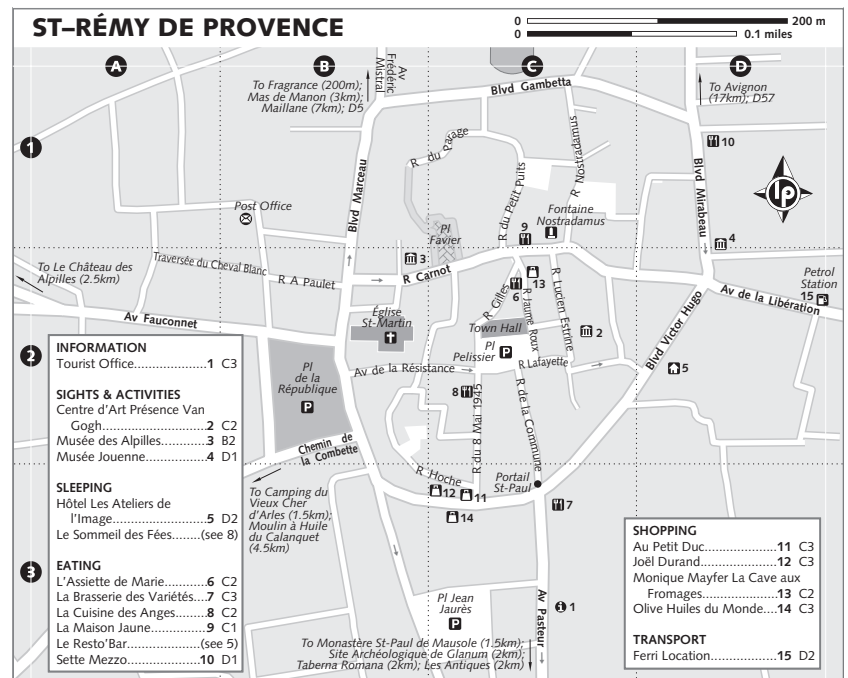
The privately run websites www.alpilles.com and www.alpilles.fr (in French) list information on the region.

Tourist office (☎ 04 90 92 05 22; www.saintremy-de-provence.com; place Jean Jaurès; ☺ 9am-noon & 2-7pm Mon-Sat, 9am-noon Sun mid-Jun-mid-Sep, 9am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Sat mid-Sep-mid-Jun) Runs numerous guided tours in English and French (adult/child €6.50/3.70) between Easter and October, including nature forays in the Alpilles.

Sights

GLANUM

Excavated remains from the Gallo-Greek (3rd to 1st centuries BC) to the Gallo-Roman (1st century BC to 3rd century AD) eras can be seen at the vast **Site Archéologique de Glanum** (archaeological site; ☎ 04 90 92 23 79; rte des Baux; adult/under 18yr €6.50/4.50; ☺ 9.30am-6.30pm, last tour 5.30pm). Among the finds uncovered are parts of Glanum's temple, public baths dating from 50 BC and the forum.



Impossible to miss, Glanum is situated opposite **Les Antiques**, a spectacular pair of Roman monuments comprising a **triumphal arch** (AD 20) and **mausoleum** (30–20 BC), just south of the centre on the southbound D5.

VAN GOGH SIGHTS

Van Gogh admitted himself to the asylum **Monastère St-Paul de Mausole** (☎ 04 90 92 77 00; maison.sainte.st.paul@wanadoo.fr; adult/under 12yr €3.80/2.80; ☎ 9.30am–7pm Apr–Oct, 10.15am–4.45pm Nov–Mar), where he accomplished 100 drawings and about 150 paintings, including his famous irises. A prison camp during WWI, the building is once again a clinic (these days for women only). Its Romanesque cloister and a reconstruction of Van Gogh's room are open to visitors.

From the monastery entrance, colour panels mark a **walking trail** of various Van Gogh subjects. Unlike the trail in Arles (p142), panels here aren't located in the spots where Van Gogh set up his easel (confined to the asylum, he painted from his mind's eye and previous forays into the Provençal countryside).

In town, his life and work are depicted at the **Centre d'Art Présence Van Gogh** (☎ 04 90 92 34 72; 8 rue Lucien Estrine; adult/student €3.80/2.80; ☎ 10.30am–12.30pm & 2.30–6.30pm Tue–Sun late Mar–Dec).

The tourist office runs a **guided Van Gogh tour** (€6.50; ☎ by reservation depending on numbers, Easter–Oct).

For more about Van Gogh's time in Provence see the boxed text, p143.

OTHER SIGHTS

Provençal and other natural landscapes painted from a contemporary perspective hang in the **Musée Jouenne** (☎ 04 32 60 00 51; www.michel-jouenne.com in French; 20 blvd Mirabeau; adult/under 12yr €4/free; ☎ 10am–12.30pm & 3–7pm Tue–Sun), a hybrid museum, art gallery and cultural centre showcasing oil-on-canvas works by French hotshot Michel Jouenne (b 1933).

The **Musée des Alpilles** (☎ 04 90 92 68 24; 1 place Favier; adult/child €3/2; ☎ 10am–12.30pm & 2–7pm Tue–Sat Jul & Aug, 10am–noon & 2–6pm Tue–Sat Mar–Jun, Sep & Oct, 2–5pm Tue–Sat Jan, Feb, Nov & Dec, plus 1st Sun each month) has comprehensive coverage of both the natural and manmade landscapes of the Alpilles, from fossils through to the present day. Its inner courtyard is watched over by an Ossip Zadkine–sculpted bust of Van Gogh.

The brother-and-sister-run **Moulin à Huile du Calanquet** (☎ 04 32 60 09 50; www.moulinducalanquet.fr; Vieux Chemin d'Arles; ☎ 9am–noon & 2.30–7pm), 4.5km southwest of St-Rémy, offers tastings of olive oil

grown and pressed on the premises, and incorporates the cooking school Moulin des Chefs, featuring top chefs in its upstairs kitchen.

Festivals & Events

Painters and sculptors transform the town streets into an open-air art gallery on four Sundays each year, in May, June, August and September during the **Fête de Peintres**.

Herd of sheep extending as far as the eye can see overtake the streets on Pentecost Monday morning during the **Fête de la Transhumance** as they're shepherded to high-altitude summer pastures. Mid-August sees a 'running of the bulls' as part of the four-day **Féria Provençale**.

Sleeping

CHAMBRES D'HÔTES

Le Sommeil des Fées (Sleepiness of Fairies; ☎ 04 90 92 17 66, 06 14 41 41 31; www.alpilles-delices.com; 4 rue du 8 Mai 1945; d incl breakfast €55-75; ☎) This storybook *chambre d'hôte* drowsing in the town centre has five dreamy rooms named after fairies, wizards and elves overlooking a pretty patio and garden; and an enchanting restaurant (opposite).

Mas de Manon (☎ 04 32 60 09 86; www.masdemanon.com; chemin des Lômes; d incl breakfast €62; ☎) You can play *pétanque* in the leafy garden of this small and simple 18th-century farmhouse 3km north of St-Rémy, with four bright rooms. From May to October there's a self-catering kitchen (with a dishwasher!) and barbecue terrace. From the town centre, follow the signs for Maillane.

Fragrance (☎ 04 90 92 35 77; www.fragrance-saintremy.com; 2 rue Emile Daillan; d incl breakfast €70-75; ☎) A 200m stroll from the town centre, this sparkling *chambre d'hôte* filled with crisp white linens and fresh flowers is run by host Chantal Vallette, whose thoughtful touches like heart-shaped soaps in the bathrooms win guests' hearts. Take a dip in the inviting timber-decked pool and breakfast on homemade pastries and cakes.

HOTELS

Hôtel Les Ateliers de l'Image (☎ 04 90 92 51 50; www.hotelphoto.com; 36 blvd Victor Hugo; d from €165, ste from €250; ☎) A darkroom allows photographers staying at this flash 'photography hotel' to develop prints; photography workshops enhance your skills; and regular photographic exhibitions provide inspiration. The hotel's grounds (including a hedge maze) also inspire, as do the glossy rooms

(our favourite: No 28 with a drawbridge to a private treehouse). Internet use is €5 for 45 minutes, parking is free.

Le Château des Alpilles (☎ 04 90 92 03 33; www.chateau-desalpilles.com; D31; d from €170; ☎) Grandeur reigns at this soaring antique-filled chateau sprawled in a park of centuries-old trees. Staff cater to every conceivable whim, and can arrange bicycle rental, horse riding and golf passes. The property's 'cypress farm' shelters apartments and lofts, and there's a collection of small, self-catering cottages. The chateau is 2.5km from the centre; take the Tarascon/Nîmes/Arles exit, turn left on the little road to Rougadou which becomes the D31 and the chateau is 2km along the road on your right.

CAMPING

Camping du Vieux Chemin d'Arles (☎ 04 90 92 72 22; campingstremy@free.fr; Vieux Chemin d'Arles; 2 adults, caravan/tent & car €10; ☎ Dec–mid-Nov) There are just six spots to pitch your tent at this family-run farm that also has a couple of swings and a seesaw for little kids. The farm is 1.5km down a country lane from St-Rémy's place de la République.

Eating & Drinking

La Cuisine des Anges (☎ 04 90 92 17 66; 4 rue du 8 Mai 1945; lunch menu €12.50, menu €25; ☎ lunch Mon–Sat, dinner daily Jun–Aug, lunch & dinner Tue–Sun Sep–Oct & Dec–May, closed Nov) Attached to the cute-as-pie *chambre d'hôte* Le Sommeil des Fées, at the 'kitchen of angels' Helene Ricard cooks up light, summery Provençal dishes like grilled sea bass and honey-glazed duck.

L'Assiette de Marie (☎ 04 90 92 32 14; 1 rue Jaume Roux; menu €30; ☎ lunch & dinner Fri–Wed) As in a big farmhouse country kitchen, knick-knacks from past eras clutter this old-worody bistro, known for its delicious traditional dishes like Provençal lamb casserole and stuffed vegetables along with contemporary creations.

La Maison Jaune (☎ 04 90 92 56 14; 15 rue Norant; menus €34-62; ☎ lunch & dinner Wed–Sun, dinner Tue–Sun, lunch Tue–Sun winter, closed Jan & Feb) Home to the most buzzing tables in town since being awarded a Michelin star in 2006, the best way to taste chef François Perraud's winning creations like saffron-roasted free-range chicken is his five-course Provençal dégustation menu (€52).

Le Resto'Bar (☎ 04 90 92 51 50; www.hotelphoto.com; 36 blvd Victor Hugo; menu €39, sushi €4-47; ☎ restaurant lunch & dinner, sushi bar dinner Tue–Sun, cocktail bar

5pm–12.30am daily) Flowing from a funky Austin Powers–style cocktail bar, the vegetable patch at the Hôtel Les Ateliers de l'Image grows the ingredients for this slick restaurant, with contemporary angles on classics like loin of Alpilles lamb in herbs and black-olive juice. Its sushi bar offers a takeaway service.

Also recommended:

Sette Mezzo (☎ 04 90 92 59 27; 34 blvd Mirabeau; lunch menu €17, dinner menu €31; ☎ lunch & dinner daily Jul & Aug, Tue–Sat Sep–Jun) Mediterranean and Italian specialities include *primo* pastas (with truffles in season).

Taberna Romana (☎ 04 90 92 65 97; www.taberna-romana.com; rte des Baux; menus €11-22; ☎ 9am–7pm Apr–Sep) Savour a drink or a Roman-inspired lunch along with a free panorama of Glanum.

Shopping

St-Rémy's shops sell scrumptious gourmet goodies to go:

Au Petit Duc (7 blvd Victor Hugo) Historical biscuits baked by food historian Anne Daguin using old Roman, Renaissance, Alpine and Arlésien recipes.

Joël Durand (3 blvd Victor Hugo) One of France's top 10 chocolate makers, utilising Provençal herbs and plants like lavender, rosemary, violet and thyme, along with out-of-the-box flavours such as Earl Grey, and coffee-and-barley.

Monique Mayer: La Cave aux Fromages (1 place Joseph Hilaire) Fabulous cheese shop with a 12th-century ripening *cave* (cellar).

Olive: Huiles du Monde (16 blvd Victor Hugo) Taste 30 different oils at its *bar à huiles* (oil bar).

Terre de Truffes (16 blvd Victor Hugo) Classy truffe boutique.

THE AUTHOR'S CHOICE

Hôtel Gounod (☎ 04 90 92 06 14; www.hotel-gounod.com; 18 place de la République; d incl breakfast €99-115; ☎) St-Rémy's oldest hotel has been totally transformed to house 37 beautiful, individually decorated rooms in romantic shades like olive, lilac and rose, and public areas decorated with antique religious icons. It was renamed in honour of composer Charles Gounod (1818–93) who stayed at the hotel in 1863 while composing his opera *Mireille*, based on Frédéric Mistral's poem. The ground-floor courtyard and dining room house an equally beautiful *salon-de-thé* (open from 7.30am to 9pm daily) serving bruschetta, homemade cakes and Illy coffee to the strains of Gounod's music.

Getting There & Around

Buses to Tarascon and Nîmes operated by **Cévennes Cars** (☎ 04 66 29 27 29) depart from place de la République. Avignon-bound buses run by **Sociétés Rapides du Sud-Est** (☎ 04 90 14 59 00) leave from blvd Victor Hugo.

Ferri Location (☎ 04 90 92 10 88; 35 av de la Libération; ☎ 7.30am-noon & 1.30-7.30pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon & 2-6pm Sat), inside the Total petrol station, rents mountain bikes for €18 a day. Helmets/child seats cost €1.50/2.30.

AROUND ST-RÉMY DE PROVENCE

Vineyards, olive groves and heady, herbal garrigue wreath St-Rémy.

Les Baux de Provence

pop 443 / elev 185m

Along a twisting, turning road 10km south of St-Rémy, Les Baux de Provence was vividly rendered – albeit from a distance – by Van Gogh during his time in St-Rémy.

Clawing precariously to a 245m-high grey limestone *baou* (Provençal for ‘rocky spur’), this fortified town gave its name to bauxite, the chief ore of aluminium first mined here in 1822. The ancient outcrop is one of the most visited villages in France – aim to arrive after the caterpillar of tourist coaches has crawled back downhill.

Thought to date back to the 10th century, the town’s high-point attraction, the **Château des Baux** (☎ 04 90 54 55 56; www.chateau-baux-provence.com; adult/student €7.50/5; ☎ 9am-8.30pm Jul & Aug, 9am-6.30pm Mar-Jun & Sep-Nov, 9am-5pm Dec-Feb) was largely destroyed during the reign of Louis XIII in 1633. Audioguides in several languages detail the history of the ruined castle, village

AUTHOR’S CHOICE

La Brasserie des Variétés (☎ 04 90 92 42 61; 32 blvd Victor Hugo, St-Rémy de Provence; menus €18.50-36; ☎ restaurant lunch & dinner Mar-Nov, lunch Tue-Thu & dinner Fri-Sun Dec-Feb, bar 7am-2am Jun-Sep, 7am-midnight Oct-Nov & Mar-May, 7am-midnight Tue-Sat Dec-Feb) A hip, energetic team is behind this retro brasserie lined with 1920s prints, which features live music, internet access (€9 per hour) and a kitchen cooking semigastronomic dishes like a pyramid of finely sliced beef and foie gras slices with wild morel mushrooms, and a huge aioli on Fridays (€16).

and region, and demonstrations of medieval warfare frequently feature in summer.

Castle apart, Les Baux is on taste-conscious travellers’ maps for the two Michelin stars glittering at the legendary 15th-century **L’Ousta de Baumanière** (☎ 04 90 54 33 07; www.oustaudebaumaniere.com; d €225-310, apt €360-490; menus €110-150; ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎), spread over a collection of buildings, and serving rarefied cuisine including a (*très gourmet*) vegetarian *menu*. A minimum of two diners is required. Head chef and owner Jean-André Chariol’s domain also includes the renowned one Michelin-starred restaurant and luxury rooms of La Cabro d’Or. Reservations are imperative for both.

The **tourist office** (☎ 04 90 54 34 39; www.lesbauxdeprovence.com; ☎ 9.30am-1pm & 2-6pm Mon-Sat) also has information on Les Baux’s handful of accommodation options.

There’s metered but no free parking within 800m of the village, but free parking is available at **Cathédrale d’Images** (www.cathedrale-images.com; adult/child €7.30/3.50; ☎ 10am-7pm Apr-Sep, 10am-6pm Oct-early Jan, closed early Jan-Feb), which screens large-scale sound-and-light projections flickering against the backdrop of a former quarry cave a few minutes’ stroll north of the village.

Maussane-les-Alpilles & Around

pop 2000

Maussane-les-Alpilles, 3km south of Les Baux on the Alpilles’ southern edge, has some of Provence’s best-known *moulins d’huile* (oil mills), where five different types of freshly harvested olives are pummelled and pressed into silken oil.

Moulin Jean-Marie Cornille (☎ 04 90 54 32 37; www.moulin-cornille.com; rue Charloun Rieu; ☎ shop 9am-6pm Mon-Sat), a 17th-century mill run as a cooperative since 1924, sells its oil direct to the public, though depending on the year’s yield, oil can sell out by mid-August. New stock comes in mid-December. Between June and September, you can also take a guided tour of the mill (€1.50, 10.30am Tuesday and Thursday).

Stunning views of the sheer, silver-ridged Alpilles unfold along the eastbound D78 from Maussane. A 6km drive southeast along the D17 brings you to **Mouriès** (population 2525). Pop in for a taste of exceptional olive oil milled at its **Moulin Coopératif** (☎ 04 90 47 53 86; www.moulincoop.com; Quartier Mas Neuf; ☎ 9am-12.30pm & 2-7pm Mon-Sat, 3-7pm Sun Jun-Sep, 9am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Sat, 2-6pm Sun Oct-May). The village celebrates a **Fête des Olivés Vertes** (green olive festival) in mid-September

ALPILLES AMBROSIA

Fine Alpilles dining isn’t confined to St-Rémy, with a smorgasbord of countryside options.

- **Le Bistrot du Paradou – Chez Jean Louis** (☎ 04 90 54 32 70; lunch/dinner menus €42/44; ☎ lunch & dinner Mon-Sat Apr-Sep, lunch Mon-Sat Oct-Mar) At his stone house beneath the plane trees, Jean-Louis is fêted for his single fixed Provençal *menus*, around which locals plan their week. Book ahead. It’s 3km west from Maussane-les-Alpilles on the D17 to Paradou.
- **Ferme Auberge de Barbegal** (☎ 04 90 54 63 69; Raphaële les Arles; menus €20-23; ☎ year-round, reserve 48hr ahead; ☎) Lamb doesn’t get any more tender than at this 18th-century sheep farm 5km south of Fontvieille. Ask about its *chambre d’hôte* rooms (prices arranged on booking).
- **Le Saint-Georges** (☎ 04 90 92 44 62; www.valmouriane.com; Domaine de Valmouriane, petit rte des Baux; lunch menu €27.50, dinner menus €32-75; ☎ closed mid-late Nov; ☎) Should you find you can’t move after St-George’s magnificent *menu dégustation à l’huile d’olive* (olive oil tasting *menu*), this idyllic country estate 6km west of St-Rémy has guest rooms (doubles from €125). Packages including a three-hour painting class for two people plus one night’s accommodation and half-board cost €215 per person.
- **Le Château des Alpilles** (p191; menus from €38; ☎ lunch Fri-Tue, dinner Thu-Tue) Dine like royalty in this castle’s stately crimson-coloured dining room.

and the arrival of the year’s new oil with a **Fête des Huiles Nouvelles** in December.

Eyguières (population 5392), 15km further east, is dominated by the Alpilles’ highest point (493m).

Nearby in **Eygalières** (population 1850; elevation 134m), take time out in the **Jardin de l’Alchimiste** (☎ 04 90 90 67 77; www.jardin-alchimiste.com; Mas de la Brune; adult/student €6/4, guided visit with drink €9; ☎ 10am-7pm May-Sep), an alchemist’s garden of blossoming herbs and plants. The village is also home to the incomparable **Le Bistrot de l’Eygalières** (☎ 04 90 90 60 34; rue de la République; menus €85-100; ☎ restaurant lunch Wed-Sun, dinner Tue-Sun; ☎), where you can savour mind-blowing flavours like cream of foie gras with fig confit and saffron mousse in Wout and Suzy Bru’s cosy dining room (twin Michelin-starred, no less), and retreat to four stunning *chambre d’hôte* doubles (from €115) and suites (from €160).

Orgon (population 2268), 9km north of Eygalières is guarded by **Notre Dame de Beauregard** (1878), a church perched up high on a needle of rock with eagle’s-eye views of the Alpilles.

Tourist offices with information on the area:

Maussane-les-Alpilles (☎ 04 90 54 52 04; www.mausane.com; place Laugier de Monblan; ☎ 9.30am-12.30pm & 3-7pm Mon-Sat Jul & Aug, 9.30am-12.30pm & 2-6pm Mon-Sat May, Jun, Sep & Oct, 9am-noon Mon-Sat Nov-Apr) **Mouriès** (☎ 04 91 13 84 13; www.mouries.com; 2 rue du Temple; ☎ 9am-12.30pm & 2-6.30pm Tue-Sat Apr-Sep, 2-5pm Mon, 9am-noon & 2-5pm Tue-Fri, 9am-noon Sat Oct-Mar)

Orgon (☎ 04 90 73 09 54; www.orgon-tourisme.com in French; place de la Liberté; ☎ 8.30am-6.30pm Mon-Sat, 8.30am-4.30pm Mon, Tue, Thu & Fri Sep-Jun)

Fontvieille

pop 3566

At Frédéric Mistral’s invitation, Alphonse Daudet found his way to Fontvieille, 10km west of Maussane along the D17, and later immortalised the town in his short stories *Lettres de mon Moulin* (Letters from my Windmill; 1869). Born in Nîmes, Daudet spent most of his life in Paris but shared a strong spiritual affinity with Provence and is regarded as a Provençal writer.

Le Moulin de Daudet (Daudet’s Windmill), which dates back to 1814 and houses the **Musée de Daudet** (adult/6-12yr €2.50/1.50, parking €2; ☎ 9am-7pm Jun-Sep, 10am-noon & 2-5pm Nov, Dec & Feb-May), is not the windmill where the writer spent hours sunk in literary thought. From the windmill-museum, there is a 1½-hour trail that leads to Daudet’s true haunt, the **Moulin Tissot-Avon**. Fontvieille’s **tourist office** (☎ 04 90 54 67 49; www.fontvieille-provence.com; 5 rue Marcel Honorat; ☎ 9am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Sat, 9am-noon Sun Jun-Sep, 9am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Sat Oct-May) has information.

Farm-fresh dining in the area includes the Ferme Auberge de Barbegal (see the boxed text, above).

The most scenic way to reach Fontvieille is by diesel train from Arles (see the boxed text, p146).

Maillane to the Rhône

Frédéric Mistral (p67) hailed from **Maillane** (population 1891), 7km northwest of St-Rémy. Born in 1830 in a farmhouse on its outskirts, the poet moved into the centre of the village with his mother following the death of his father. Upon marrying, 46-year-old Mistral left home, only to move with his 19-year-old wife into the **house** (☎ 04 90 95 74 06; 11 av Lamar-tine; adult/student €3.50/1; ☎ 9.30-11.30am & 2.30-6.30pm Tue-Sun Apr-Sep, 10-11.30am & 2-4.30pm Tue-Sun Oct-Mar) opposite his mother's, where he lived until his death in 1914. Today the house is a museum, and runs writing workshops in Provençal. Mistral is buried in the village cemetery.

Continuing 3km north, you hit **Graveson** (population 3190) with its garden-graced 19th-century farmhouse containing the **Musée des Arômes et du Parfum** (Museum of Aromas & Perfumes; ☎ 04 90 95 81 55; www.viearome.com in French; petite rte du Gès; adult/under 12yr €4/free; ☎ 10am-noon & 2-6pm, to 7pm summer); **Les Figuières du Mas de Luquet** (☎ 04 90 95 72 03; www.lesfiguières.com; chemin du Mas de la Musique), an orchard growing over 150 varieties of figs; and **Musée Auguste Chabaud** (☎ 04 90 95 03 02; www.museechabaud.com in French; cours National; adult/student €4/2; ☎ 10am-noon & 1.30-6.30pm Jun-Sep, 1.30-6.30pm Oct-May), dedicated to the Nîmes-born fauvist painter who lived in Graveson for most of his life.

From Graveson the D81 meanders through the undulating **Massif de la Montagne**. Hidden in its rolling hills is **Abbaye St-Michel de Frigolet**, a neogothic abbey (1863-66) with vast grounds and a tower-topped **hotel-restaurant** (☎ 04 90 90 52 70; www.frigolet.com; d €46-57; menu €13, picnic basket €8; ☎).

Medieval **Barbantane** (population 3780) is dominated by the 28m-tall **Tour Anglica** (1385) and classical 17th-century **château** (visitable from Easter to October), and has a particularly lovely **chambre d'hôte** framed by pine trees, **Le Mazet de la Dame** (☎ 04 90 90 91 73; www.la-dame.com; d incl breakfast around €100; ☎).

TARASCON & BEAUCAIRE

Provençal lore comes to life in the streets of **Tarascon** (population 12,991) during June's **Fête de la Tarasque**, a Chinese-style dragon parade celebrating St Martha's slaying of Tarasque, a dragon legend says once lurked in the Rhône. Rearing up from the riverbank, **Château de Tarascon** (☎ 04 90 91 01 93; adult/child €6.50/4.50; ☎ 9am-7pm Apr-Sep, 9am-noon & 2-5pm Tue-Sun Oct-Mar) was built by Louis II in the 15th century

to defend Provence's political frontier and richly decorated under King René (1434-80), but later stripped and used as a mint and then as a prison until 1926.

Facing the chateau, across the Rhône in **Beaucaire** (population 14,000), the ruined 11th-century **Château de Beaucaire** (☎ 04 66 59 26 72; www.aigles-de-beaucaire.com; place du Château; adult/5-11yr €9/6; ☎ 3 or 4 afternoon shows mid-Mar-mid-Nov) can only be entered during falconry displays; when visitors can also take advantage of the castle's shaded picnic area. Bulls stampede through Beaucaire's streets heralding the week-long **Foire de Beaucaire** in mid-July.

Southwest of Beaucaire on the D38 towards Bellegarde is the **Mas des Tourelles** (☎ 04 66 59 19 72; www.tourelles.com; adult/5-16yr €4.80/1.50; ☎ 10am-noon & 2-7pm Mon-Sat, 2-7pm Sun Jul & Aug, 2-6pm Apr-Jun, Sep & Oct, 2-6pm Sat Nov-Mar), a farm where you can learn how the Romans made wine. In the cellar, taste farm-made Roman **muscum** (honeyed wine) and **defrutum** (grape juice).

Tourist offices with information on the towns:

Beaucaire (☎ 04 66 59 26 57; www.ot-beaucaire.fr; 24 cours Gambetta; ☎ 8.45am-12.15pm & 2-6pm Mon-Fri, 9.30am-12.15pm & 3-6pm Sat, 9.30am-12.30pm Sun Jul, 8.45am-12.15pm & 2-6pm Mon-Fri, 9.30am-12.15pm & 3-6pm Sat Aug-Oct & Easter-Jun, 8.45am-12.15pm & 2-6pm Mon-Fri, 9.30am-12.15pm Sat Nov-Easter)

Tarascon (☎ 04 90 91 03 52; www.tarascon.org; 59 rue des Halles; ☎ 9am-noon & 2-7pm Mon-Sat, 9.30am-12.30pm Sun Jul & Aug, 9am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon & 2-5pm Sat, 9.30am-12.30pm Sun Jun & Sep, 9am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon & 2-5pm Sat Oct-May)

ACROSS THE RIVER RHÔNE

Roman relics loom large across the Rhône with a resplendent amphitheatre in Nîmes and an enormous aqueduct on the River Gard. Although no longer a part of Provence proper (these sights are located in the Languedoc-Roussillon *région*) both make a striking day trip from Nîmes.

NÎMES

pop 137,740

Ironically for a city on neither a river nor the sea, Nîmes' coat of arms is a crocodile, chained to a palm tree. The shield's insignia

harks back to Nîmes' Roman history, recalling the retiring Roman legionaries who fought with Caesar during his River Nile campaign, and were granted land as their reward.

The Roman Colonia Nemausensis reached its zenith in the 2nd century, receiving its water supply from an aqueduct system that included the still-standing Pont du Gard (p200), 23km to the northeast. The sacking of the city by the Vandals in the early 5th century began a downward spiral in fortunes.

The crocodile emblem, redesigned by French style master Philippe Starck, bridges the city's ancient origins with its cutting-edge urban evolution. Starck also designed a bus stop (Atribus) on av Carnot. Other striking contemporary public spaces include Norman Foster's Carrée d'Art and Niçois painter Martial Raysse's fountained square, place d'Assas.

Nîmes' name (well, part of it) is a household one, thanks to Bavarian tailor Levi Strauss who struck gold during the California rush by outfitting miners with durable trousers made from the traditional blue *serge de Nîmes*, nowadays known as denim.

A lesser-known claim to fame is Nîmes' native son Jean Nicot (1530-1600), who was born on place d'Horloge, and imported tobacco into France from Portugal in 1560, hence the word 'nicotine'. Ironically too, Nicot was a doctor by profession.

Orientation

Everything, including traffic, revolves around Les Arènes. Just north of the amphitheatre, the fan-shaped, largely pedestrianised old city is bounded by blvd Victor Hugo, blvd Amiral Courbet and blvd Gambetta. North of place aux Herbes, one of the main squares, lies the Îlot Littre, the preserved dyers' quarter.

Southeast of Les Arènes is esplanade Charles de Gaulle, a large open square, from where av Feuchères leads southeast to the train and bus stations.

Information

INTERNET RESOURCES

Nîmes (www.nimes.fr in French) Official city website.

Sortir à Nîmes (www.sortiranimes.com in French) Indispensable city-entertainment guide.

MEDICAL SERVICES

A list of pharmacies open at night is posted in the window of the tourist office on week-ends.

SOS Médecins (☎ 08 20 33 24 24; ☎ 24hr) Call-out doctor service.

MONEY

Commercial banks line blvd Amiral Courbet and the western side of blvd Victor Hugo.

POST

Main post office (1 blvd de Bruxelles)

TOURIST INFORMATION

Comité Départemental du Tourisme du Gard

(☎ 04 66 36 96 30; www.tourismegard.com; 3 rue de la Cité Foulc; ☎ 8am-8pm Mon-Fri, 9.30am-noon Sat Jul & Aug, 8.45am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9.30am-noon Sat Sep-Jun) Information on the Gard *département*.

Tourist office (☎ 04 66 58 38 00; www.ot-nimes.fr; 6 rue Auguste; ☎ 8am-8pm Mon-Sat, 10am-6pm Sun Jul & Aug, 8.30am-7pm Mon-Sat, 10am-5pm or 6pm Sun Sep-Jun) City information.

Sights

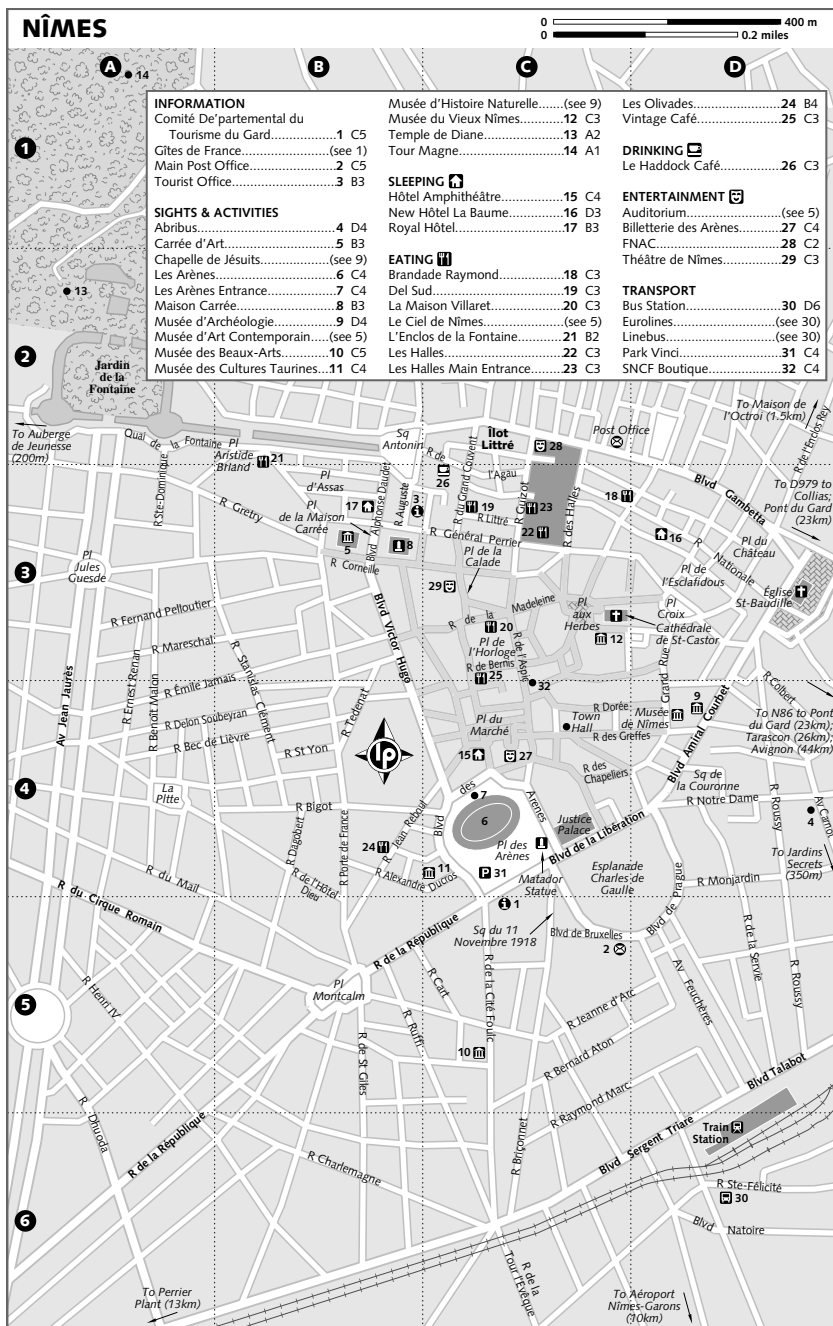
LES ARÈNES

Impressively intact, Nîmes' dramatic Roman **amphitheatre** (places des Arènes; adult/10-16yr €7.70/5.60; ☎ 9am-7pm Jun-Aug, 9am-5.30pm Mar-May, Oct & Sep, 9.30am-4.30pm Nov-Feb) was built around AD 100 to seat 24,000 spectators – marginally more than its counterpart in Arles, though Arles' is a smidge bigger in size. Unlike Arles' amphitheatre retains its upper storey. The interior has four tiers of seats and a system of exits and passages designed so that patricians attending the animal and gladiator combats never had to rub shoulders with the plebs up top.

Covered by a hi-tech removable roof October to April, year-round Les Arènes stages plays, music concerts and bullfights (for ticket details see p199).

MAISON CARRÉE & CARRÉE D'ART

Also remarkably preserved, the rectangular, Greek-style temple known as the **Maison Carrée** (Square House; place de la Maison Carrée; adult/11-16yr €4.50/3.60; ☎ 9am-7pm Jun-Aug, 9am-5.30pm Mar-May, Oct & Sep, 9.30am-4.30pm Nov-Feb) was built around AD 5 to honour Augustus' grandsons (whom he adopted and raised), Gaius and Lucius. It survived the centuries as a meeting hall (during the Middle Ages), a private residence, a stable (in the 17th century), a church and, after the Revolution, an archive. Six symmetrical Corinthian columns stand guard at its entrance.

**HISTORICAL MONUMENT COMBO**

Save on Nîmes' big three – Les Arènes, La Maison Carrée and Tour Magne – with a **combination ticket** (adult/child €9/7).

Culture; ☺ 04 66 36 83 77; musee.taureau@ville-nimes.fr; 6 rue Alexandre Ducros; adult/10-16yr €4.65/3.40).

Less fascinating (but free) is the **Musée du Vieux Nîmes** (☺ 04 66 76 73 70; musee.vieux-nimes@ville-nimes.fr; place aux Herbes; admission free), a history museum in a 17th-century episcopal palace where among the eccentric collections, pin-ups of jeans-clad Elvis, James Dean and Marilyn Monroe showcase the famous fabric *de Nîmes*.

Tours

The tourist office runs two-hour city tours (€5.50) in French at 10am on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday in summer, and 2.30pm on Saturday the rest of the year.

Sit back and let someone else worry about Nîmes' merry-go-round traffic aboard **Taxi TRAN** (☺ 04 66 29 40 11), which offers tours of the city (from €25 per hour for up to six people; pick-up by arrangement) with recorded commentary in English. Inquire at the tourist office.

Festivals & Events

Nîmes' Spanish spirit comes to the fore during its *férias*, including the five-day **Féria de Pentecôte** (Pentecost Festival) in June, and the three-day **Féria des Vendanges** marking the start of the grape harvest on the third weekend in September. These *corridos*, which see bulls bred to be aggressively killed in a bloody spectacle involving picadors, *toreadors*, matadors and horses, and *novilladas* (fights with bulls less than four years old) are feverishly popular. Reserve tickets several months ahead via the Billetterie des Arènes or FNAC (see p199).

Courses Camarguais (see the boxed text, p148) are also on show during the bullfighting season. The best bulls are rewarded with a couple of bars from Bizet's opera *Carmen* as they leave the arena.

Every Thursday between 6pm and 10.30pm in July and August, artists, artisans and food stalls selling local delicacies fill the main city squares during **Les Jeudis de Nîmes**.

Sleeping

Accommodation prices fluctuate wildly during *férias*.

A FIZZY DETOUR

Lift the lid on perennially popular Perrier water (400 million bottles a year are sold in France alone) by heading 13km southwest of Nîmes to the **Perrier plant** (☎ 04 66 87 61 01; adult/child €6/3; 🗓️ tours by advance reservation 9.15am-5pm daily Jul & Aug, 9.30am-4pm Mon-Fri Feb-Jun & Sep-Dec). One-hour behind-the-scenes factory tours (in French) take in the manufacturing of Perrier's iconic green bottles, its bottling line and a tasting. From Nîmes, take the A9 or A54 and exit at Gallargue; the plant is on the RN113 in Vergèze.

CHAMBRES D'HÔTES

Maison de l'Octroi (☎ 04 66 27 15 95; www.bed-breakfast-nîmes.com; 209 chemin de Russan; d incl breakfast €60-70; 🗓️ 🍷 🍷 🍷) Host Nicole Crès keeps her two *chambre d'hôte* rooms spick-and-span and serves delicious breakfasts overlooking a 5000-sq-metre garden filled with oak and lime trees. (If you stay three or more nights, she also gives you a bottle of wine.) The house is 1.5km north of the city centre; parking is free.

Jardins Secrets (☎ 04 66 84 82 64; www.jardinssecrets.net; 3 rue Gaston Maruejols; d €190-260; 🗓️ 🍷 🍷 🍷) Palm trees, clambering plants and a profusion of flourishing flowers grace the 'secret garden' at this fashionable *chambre d'hôte*, a five-minute stroll from Les Arènes. Inside, rooms glow with polished floorboards and rich colours, with luxurious touches like tassel-curtained bathtubs. Breakfast is an additional €20; parking also costs €20.

HOTELS

Hôtel Amphithéâtre (☎ 04 66 67 28 51; hotel-amphitheatre@wanadoo.fr; 4 rue des Arènes; s €34-39, d €44-61; 🗓️ Feb-Dec; 🍷 🍷 🍷) Just up the road from its namesake, this friendly, family-run hotel is snugly at home within a former pair of 18th-century mansions. Each of its 15 rooms is named after a writer or painter and a couple have balconies overlooking pedestrian place du Marché. Paul Valéry, Diderot and Beaumarchais on the 3rd floor have air-con.

Royal Hôtel (☎ 04 66 58 28 27; rhotel@wanadoo.fr; 3 blvd Alphonse Daudet; s €45-65, d €60-85) New owners have preserved the arty atmosphere of this hotel. The huge dove cage still sits beside reception and the local intelligentsia continue to discourse over coffee in La Bodeguita (open

6pm to late Monday to Saturday), its *très Espagnol* (or rather, *mismo Español*) café. Some of the artistically furnished rooms overlook place d'Assas, itself a work of modern art.

New Hôtel La Baume (☎ 04 66 76 28 42; www.new-hotel.com; 21 rue Nationale; s/d €95/120; 🗓️ 🍷 🍷 🍷) In true Nîmes style, traditional décor including stone staircases adorned in shades of ochre, beige and cream pairs perfectly with contemporary wrought iron and glass furnishings at this 34-room hotel wrapping around a beautiful interior courtyard. Wi-fi costs €9.50 for two hours; or you can use the internet point via a credit card for €0.35 per minute.

HOSTEL

Auberge de Jeunesse (☎ 04 66 68 03 20; www.hi-nîmes.com; 257 chemin de l'Auberge de Jeunesse, la Cigale; dm €11.65, d/q €27.30/46.60; 🗓️ 🍷 🍷) You'll find everything from dorms to cosy cottages for two to six in this botanical park 3.5km northwest of the train station. As well as a children's playground, self-catering facilities and bike hire (per day €14) there's limited camping (per person €5.85). Take bus 1 (direction Alès or Villeverthe) to the Stade stop; it's a 500m walk uphill.

Eating & Drinking

Place aux Herbes, place du Marché with its crocodile and vast palm tree, and the western side of place de la Maison Carrée buzz with café life. Several cosy dining spots are hidden away on place de l'Esclafidous.

Vintage Café (☎ 04 66 21 04 45; 7 rue de Bernis; lunch menus €11-17, dinner menus €17-23; 🗓️ lunch Tue-Fri, dinner Tue-Sat) Exhibitions by local artists add to the ambience of this buzzing little bistro. An intimate spot for authentic Languedoc cuisine like smoked haddock, it's also a cosy, convivial place to discover the region's fine vintages.

Le Haddock Café (☎ 04 66 67 86 57; 13 rue de l'Agau; menus €13-18; 🗓️ 11am-3pm & 7pm-1am Mon-Sat; 🍷) A highlight of Nîmois nightlife, this alternative café-bar hosts changing art exhibitions and concerts, and has an affordable and atmospheric restaurant with brimming bowls of *moules et frites* (mussels and fries) on Wednesdays at both lunch and dinner for €10.

Les Olivades (☎ 04 66 21 71 78; 18 rue Jean Reoul; lunch/dinner menu €11/26; 🗓️ lunch & dinner Tue-Fri, dinner Sat) First and foremost this is a wonderful wine shop well worth dropping by in its own right to pick up a Costières de Nîmes from

the pebble-sprinkled vineyards to the south. But make your way beyond the bottles to the cosy dining area out the back, which dishes up flavourous regional fare.

Del Sud (☎ 04 66 67 22 50; 10 rue Littre; lunch/dinner menu €12/21; 🗓️ lunch & dinner Tue-Sat) Views of otherwise-hidden *hôtels particulier* can be savoured along with traditional Mediterranean cuisine in the 15th- to 18th-century courtyard of this popular spot, which has live music (and sometimes theatre) on Wednesdays.

Le Ciel de Nîmes (☎ 04 66 36 71 70; place de la Maison Carrée; mains €12/25; 🗓️ lunch & dinner Tue-Sun, until 2am Thu-Sat; 🍷) Beneath a metallic-covered terrace with a stunning view of Nîmes' Roman temple, this chic rooftop hang-out at the Carrée d'Art is much favoured by fashionable Nîmois for its exemplary cuisine and has good wheelchair access.

L'Enclos de la Fontaine (☎ 04 66 21 90 30; www.hotel-imperator.com in French; quai de la Fontaine; menu €60, mains €22-28; 🗓️ lunch & dinner) At Nîmes' most beautiful garden restaurant, chef Patrick Chalamet delights with creations like marinated venison with hazelnut sauce, followed by a mouthwatering selection of farm-fresh *fromage* (cheese). Afterwards the literary-minded can pop into the Hemingway Bar, and the romantically minded can head upstairs to the grand old rooms (doubles from €121) of the Hôtel Imperator Concorde.

SELF-CATERING

The vast covered food market **Les Halles** (rue Guizot, rue Général Perrin & rue des Halles; 🗓️ 6.30am-1pm) dating to 1885 is the city's 'gourmet soul'.

Caladons – Nîmes' honey and almond-studded biscuits – are sold at most patisseries. Rival *croquants Villaret* – rock-hard finger-shaped almonds biscuits – have been baked by the Villaret family at **La Maison Villaret** (cnr rue de la Madeleine & place de l'Horloge) since 1775.

Veteran delicatessen **Brandade Raymond** (☎ 04 66 67 20 47; 34 rue Nationale) has made Nîmes' traditional salted-cod paste, *Brandade de Nîmes*, since 1879.

Entertainment

What's-on listings fill the fortnightly publication *À Nîmes*, available from the **tourist office** (☎ 04 66 58 38 00; www.ot-nîmes.fr; 6 rue Auguste; 🗓️ 8am-8pm Mon-Sat, 10am-6pm Sun Jul & Aug, 8.30am-7pm Mon-Sat, 10am-5pm or 6pm Sun Sep-Jun).

Tickets for bullfights and cultural events are sold at outlets including FNAC, inside La

Coupole des Halles indoor shopping centre; at the **Billetterie des Arènes** (☎ 04 66 02 80 90; www.arenedenîmes.com in French; 4 rue de la Violette; 🗓️ 9.30am-noon & 1.30-6pm Tue-Fri, 10am-1pm Sat); and on the latter's website.

Plays, ballet, modern dance and music recitals take place in the **Théâtre de Nîmes** (☎ 04 66 36 65 00; 1 place de la Calade). Documentaries and films (French only) are screened in the **auditorium** (☎ 04 66 76 35 36) inside the Carrée d'Art.

Getting There & Away**AIR**

Aéroport Nîmes-Garons (☎ 04 66 70 49 49) is 10km southeast on the A54 to Arles. At press time, it was served only by Ryanair flights to/from England.

BUS

From the **bus station** (☎ 04 66 29 52 00; rue Ste-Félicité) bus services include Pont du Gard (€6.20, 45 minutes, six daily).

International bus operators **Eurolines** (☎ 04 66 29 49 02) and **Linebus** (☎ 04 66 29 50 62) have offices at the far end of the terminal. SNCF buses head to Aigues-Mortes (€6.30, one hour) in the Camargue.

TRAIN

The city's **train station** (blvd Talabot) is at the southeastern end of av Feuchères. In town, tickets are sold at the **SNCF Boutique** (11 rue de l'Aspic; 🗓️ 8.30am-6.50pm Tue-Sat). Destinations include Avignon Centre (€7.50, 45 minutes, 10 or more daily) and Arles (€6.70, 30 minutes, nine daily). A number of SNCF trains head to Aigues-Mortes (€6.30, 40 minutes).

Getting Around**TO/FROM THE AIRPORT**

An airport bus (€4.50, 30 minutes), leaving from the train station, meets all flights. Ring ☎ 04 66 29 52 00 to confirm times. Bus drivers sell tickets.

BICYCLE

Motorists parked in **Park Vinci** (place des Arènes; 🗓️ 24hr) can pick up a bike for free.

Véloland (☎ 04 66 36 01 80; 4 rue de la République; 🗓️ Tue-Sat & Mon am) rents mountain bikes (per half-/full day €9/15).

AROUND NÎMES

A short side trip from Nîmes brings you to the mighty Pont du Gard, straddling the wild

A SWEET DETOUR

From the Pont du Gard, drive 14km along the D981 to the **Musée du Bonbon** (☎ 04 66 22 74 39; Pont des Charrettes, Uzès; adult/5-15yr €4.50/2.50; 🕒 10am-7pm Jul & Aug, 10am-1pm & 2-6pm Tue-Sun Sep-Jun), a sweets museum where you can identify smells in the Espace Arôme, take part in a treasure hunt, and learn how many millions of jelly bears and kilometres of liquorice wheels are made each day by German sweet maker Haribo. Free sweets are doled out at reception, with trolleyloads for sale at wholesale prices.

river. For *chambre d'hôte* and self-catering accommodation contact **Gîtes de France** (☎ 04 66 36 96 30; www.tourismegard.com; Comité Départemental du Tourisme du Gard, 3 rue de la Cité Foulc; 🕒 8am-8pm Mon-Fri, 9.30am-noon Sat Jul & Aug, 8.45am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9.30am-noon Sat Sep-Jun) in Nîmes.

PONT DU GARD

The Romans didn't do anything on a small scale, and this awe-inspiring three-tiered aqueduct is no exception.

A Unesco World Heritage site, the exceptionally intact Pont du Gard was once part of a 50km-long system of canals built around 19 BC by Agrippa, Augustus' deputy and son-in-law (and the late father of Augustus' adoptive sons), to bring water from the Eure Springs in Uzès, 25km northwest, to Nîmes. The 35 arches of the 275m-long upper tier, running 50m above the River Gard, contain a 1.2m by 1.75m watercourse that, for a century and a half, carried 35,000 cu metres of water a day. Construction spanned 15 years and the aqueduct remained in use until the 3rd century.

From giant **car parks** (€5; 🕒 closed 1am-6am) either side of the River Gard, you can walk along the road bridge, built in 1743, which runs parallel with the aqueduct's lower tier. The best view is from upstream, beside the river, where you can swim.

Visitor numbers reach a punishing 15,000 or so daily in July and August. Admission to the site is free; parking is reimbursed if you

purchase a **combination ticket** (adult/child €10/8) or **family ticket** (2 adults & up to 4 children under 17yr €20). Combination and family tickets also cover the **museum** (admission €6), a 25-minute **film** (with English version €3) and the **Ludo** (admission €4.50), a fun and informative children's centre. The **Accueil du Pont du Gard** (☎ 08 20 90 33 30; www.pontdugard.fr; Le Portal, rte du Pont du Gard; 🕒 9.30am or 10am-5.30pm or 7pm, closed Mon morning) has information and sells tickets.

It's worth purchasing an explanatory booklet (€4, in English) for the 1.4km-long **Mémoires de Garrigue** (🕒 9.30am-6pm Apr-mid-Oct) walking trail through typical Mediterranean bush, scrubland and olive groves. A spectacular free **light show** (nightly Jul & Aug, Fri & Sat Jun & Sep) beams out into the summer night sky. From mid-June to mid-September, depending on numbers, it's possible to walk the bridge's topmost tier (€6) with a guide.

River Gard

The unpredictable River Gard descends from the Cévennes mountains. Torrential rains can raise the water level by as much as 5m in a flash, whereas during long dry spells it can almost disappear.

The river has sliced itself a meandering 22km gorge (Les Gorges du Gardon) through the hills from **Russan** to the village of **Collias**, about 6km upstream from the Pont du Gard. The GR6 trail runs beside it most of the way.

In Collias, 4km west of the D981, **Kayak Vert** (☎ 04 66 22 80 76; www.canoe-france.com/gardon) and **Canoë Le Tourbillon** (☎ 04 66 22 85 54; www.canoë-le-tourbillon.com), both based near the village bridge, rent out kayaks and canoes.

You can paddle 7km down to the Pont du Gard (€18 per person, two hours), or arrange to be dropped upstream, wending back through watery Gorges du Gardon (€30, full day), usually possible only between March and mid-June, when the river is high enough.

Getting There & Away

The Pont du Gard is 21km northeast of Nîmes and 26km west of Avignon. Buses to/from each (three to five daily) normally stop 1km north of the bridge. In summer, some make a diversion to the Pont du Gard car park.

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