

# Avignon

**Avignon** is one of the major cities of Provence, in Southern France. It is the main city of the département of Vaucluse, and is located on the banks of the Rhône River. Avignon was one of the European Cities of Culture in 2000.

## Understand

Avignon is famous as the city to which the Popes fled when leaving the corruption of Rome in the 14th century. The Palais they built, 'Le Palais des Papes,' is the *world's largest Gothic edifice*. It was largely emptied over the centuries, and its vast stone rooms are filled with little more than old frescos, but it is still an imposing building. The Ramparts themselves were erected to keep the plague and invaders out during the turbulent middle ages, when Avignon belonged to the papacy and not the French crown.

Its early history is much older than the popes, however. Avignon occupies a strategic location for several reasons - it is at the *confluence of two once-mighty rivers*: the Rhône, still one of the biggest rivers in France, and the now largely-dammed Durance. Both were important routes of trade and communication even in prehistoric times. In addition, there is a long island in the Rhone that made it possible to ferry people and goods across, and later bridge the river, more easily than in other places.

It is estimated that about 200,000 people live in Avignon, 16,000 of which live 'intra-muros,' or within the ramparts built in the 14th century.

The city is now sprinkled with buildings and monuments ranging from the new to the old, the very old, and the ageless.

## History

Avignon has been continuously inhabited since the stone age, when troglodyte inhabitations were built in caves in the Rocher des Dames, a massive outcropping of rock rising over the banks of the Rhône. Today, a public park with benches, views over the surrounding countryside, a café and playground is located on top of the Rocher.

The Romans had a presence in Avignon, though the walls they built lie buried somewhere under the modern streets. Vestiges of the forum can still be seen, lying unassumingly near the Rue Racine and the Rue Saint-Etienne, to the west of the city.

Then, in medieval times, the town grew to an important center of communication and trade. The stone bridge spanning the Rhone was one of only three between the Mediterranean and Lyon. It was undoubtedly for its strategic location and ease of travel

that it was chosen by the papacy as home within the then kingdom of Provence. The presence of the papacy made Avignon into a city of great political and economic activity. The old city wall, now visible only as a street that circles the very center of the town (changing names 5 times in the process!) was much too small and a larger wall, still visible today, was necessary to protect its bulging population. Wealthy Cardinals built extravagant palaces known as *livrées* both within Avignon and across the river, in Villeneuve-lès-Avignon.

The city teemed with activity and building as architects, builders, artists flocked to the town. At that time, within the city walls there were over 100 churches and chapels - many of which have been transformed since then into everything from shops to a movie theater! The wealth and activity generated by the presence of the papacy spilled out into the region, so that even small villages nearby boast a rich architectural past.

## Get in

### By train

Avignon lies on the [TGV](#) line from Paris to Marseille, about three hours from Paris, Gare de Lyon. It is also served by numerous local and regional services.

Local and regional trains call at the central station, outside the walls on the southern edge of the old town. TGVs call at Avignon TGV, about 2km out of town. A regular bus links the TGV station with the square outside the post office, just opposite central station.

It is also possible to catch the Eurostar direct from London to Avignon.

## Get around

A map of the city, lists of hotels in all price ranges, restaurants, ideas for nightlife, and daytrips to the surrounding countryside can be found at the **Office de Tourisme**, 41 cours Jean Jaures (in the main street, which begins just inside the walls across from the regular train station).

## See

A popular tourist destination is the **Place du Palais**, just next to the **Place de L'horloge**, though the casual tourist may find these places shockingly expensive, and flooded during the summer months with tourists. Within a short distance in just about any direction are the **smaller squares** frequented by the locals, and much lower prices. Recommended is the **Place Pie**, with its covered market (open 6am to 1 pm everyday) which sells fresh produce, cheeses, wines, and produits du pays.

### Pont d'Avignon

- **Le Pont Saint-Benezet** is a ruined bridge not far from the Palais des Papes. The bridge was built in the Middle Ages - before the arrival of the Papacy - perhaps partly to allow the local bishop to cross the river to Villeneuve-lès-Avignon, where the church authorities had installed themselves because of Avignon's then-infamous dirt and lawlessness.

The legend of the bridge's building is that a local shepherd, Benezet (a dialect form of Benedict) was inspired by angels to build a bridge. When his appeals to the town authorities proved fruitless, he picked up a vast block of stone and hurled it into the river, to be the bridge's foundation stone. Convinced by this demonstration of divine will, the bridge was swiftly built. The poor shepherd boy was canonized, and his chapel remains on the surviving portion of the bridge.

If the bridge was divinely inspired, the Deity must have quickly changed his mind, because before long the bridge became unsafe and, following numerous floods, mostly derelict. Originally, the bridge had 22 arches, reaching across to the tower of Philippe le Bel via the mid-stream île de la Barthelasse. Only 4 of the 22 arches now remain. A multilingual audio tour of the bridge explains some of the local history.

The well-known song "Sur **Le Pont D'Avignon** (on the bridge at Avignon) refers to the bridge. The bridge itself is far too narrow for dancing or festivals - the original text of the song was "Sous (under) le pont d'Avignon", referring to the festivals and entertainments staged on the île de la Barthelasse. The current version was popularized by a 19th century operetta, whose librettist clearly assumed that 'sous le pont d'Avignon' would have meant in the river.

## Museums

Avignon has its share of museums, ranging from **Modern Art Museums** to museums housing artifacts from the Roman and pre-Roman days.

## Do

**Think Outside the Watermelon** offers private English-language walking tours led by local residents.

## Events

- **Theatre Festival** Avignon is famous the world over for its annual theatre festival. For three or four weeks in July the city is virtually swollen with street performers, actors, musicians, and of course the ubiquitous tourists. The festival is an excuse to turn any room with enough seating into a 'salle de spectacle' and the city is host to a wide variety of entertainment. The gems of this festival are the performances that take place inside the Pope's Palace itself. Tickets are expensive, but this is considered by many French and European thespians to be a crowning achievement of a career. The vast majority of performances are, of course, in

French but a number of foreign companies perform in (eg) English. Even without attending any events, the atmosphere and street theatre give the city a marvelous feeling.

- **The International Congress Center** was created in 1976 within the outstanding premises of the Palace of the Popes and hosts many events throughout the entire year.

## Eat

### Mid-range

- Woolloomooloo, *16 bis, rue des teinturiers 84000* 04 90 85 28 44  
contact@woolloo.com Open until 10:30 pm in winter, 11:30 pm in summer. High quality food with a very multi-cultural bent, and fantastic decorations, and location. The Senegalesse chicken is well worth investigating. Great selections of Belgian Beers.
- Restaurant *l'Orangerie Place Jerusalem*. This is an impressive small restaurant just a few minutes walk from the tourist-center Place de l'Horloge. Style is Provencal/Corsican. In Summer it has tables on the Square, the rest of the year it has four tables and bar on the ground floor and a few more upstairs. The Chocolate Torte is thoroughly Recommended.

### Splurge

- **Restaurant Christian Etienne** - a well known Provence chef, his restaurant is right next to the Palais des Papes. An excellent vegetarian menu is available.

## Sleep

### Budget

- **Auberge-Camping Bagatelle Ile de la Barthelasse**. This Hotel/ Hostel and Camp Site is situated on Ile de la Bathelasse in the centre of the Rhone . This is perhaps the best place to stay on a budget. It has great facilities and offers perhaps the best view of the centre of Avignon.
- **Hotel de l'Atelier** 5 rue de la Foire
- **Hotel d'Angleterre** 29 Boulevard Raspail (*10 minute walk from bus and train station*). €40, some rooms with bathroom, parking included. Small hotel located within the city walls.
- **Hotel le Medieval** 15 rue Petite Saunerie

### Mid-range

- **Mas du Clos de l'Escarrat** Route de Carpentras chemin de l'Escarrat. Bed & Breakfast
- **Avignon Colbert Hotel**--*In the heart of the medieval city, Provençal air conditioning room 7 rue Agricol Perdiguier*

## Splurge

- **Hotel d 'Europe** 12, Place Crillon 5-star
- **La Mirande Hotel** 4, place de la Mirande €400 and up. 5 star hotel housed in a 700 year old converted townhouse.

## Get out

The surrounding region is full of interesting sites, There are three sites inscribed on the [UNESCO World Heritage List](#)

- **Arles** is full of Roman and Romanesque monuments and worthy of a full days exploration.
- **Orange** just a short train ride to the north is home to one of the finest Roman Theatres in Europe
- **Le Pont du Gard** is about 30km to the West it is probably the finest Roman aqueduct still in existence, and a great place for hiking and canoeing.

Other notable sites nearby are:

- **Nîmes** which has a huge Roman Ampitheatre and a famous Greek Temple
- **Châteauneuf-du-Pape** is a short train ride north and is home to some of France's most famous vineyards

For more info see: [www.wikipedia.org](http://www.wikipedia.org)

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