

France: Back roads of Provence

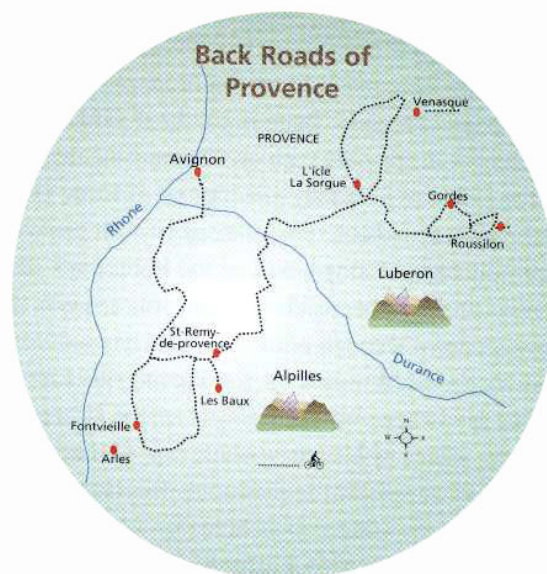
Tour code: CPB

Revised: January 08

On this self-guided cycle tour, you pedal through the quiet old back roads of Provence; threading your way into Large areas of natural beauty, villages filled with history, a region loved for its art de vivre, gastronomy, vineyards and traditions. Leave the main roads behind and discover inspiring landscapes; a trip through time and traditions.

Starting from the banks of the River Rhône, you won't fail to be impressed by the lofty Gothic Popes' Palace in Medieval Avignon, with walls 18-feet thick, dominating the city. On the other extreme there is a chance to visit Greco-Roman Arles where local tradition lives on with Bull fights conducted in the Roman amphitheater. Away from these urban centres, you will be cycling through a low range of Provencal mountains called The Alpilles. This is an area of forests, vineyards and olive groves, highlighted by two particularly pretty small towns: Saint Rémy de Provence adopted home of Van Gogh and Les Baux de Provence, a village with a spectacular position in the hills, set atop a rocky outcrop crowned with a ruined castle overlooking the plains to the south. The former is still a busy little market town, the latter was once renowned for its court, famed for its high level of ornateness, culture and chivalry.

On the way you will also take in the treasures of another range of hills, those of the Luberon, such as L'Isle-sur-la-Sorgue with its antiques shops, hosting colourful and lively antique market. Then there is Roussillon which stands on a hilltop in the heart of "ocher country" and boasts houses in every shade of burnt orange, dusty pink, and russet red that take on a particular brilliance at sunset. Also visit Gordes one of 'le plus beau village de France' a town of silk painters, weavers, and potters with houses built of golden stone that rise to the Renaissance château crowning the top.



Season

March to October (July & August can be very hot).

Level of Difficulty

This is a hilly region where cycling requires a degree of stamina. This trip is graded moderate. You cycle between 30 and about 62 km a day over some hilly terrain so a reasonable standard of fitness and stamina is required. It can be windy if the Mistral winds blow. The summer heat can be a problem, but by making early starts you can escape the hottest part of the day, but note that hotels do not often serve early breakfasts..

The Bikes

The normal specification is as follows: 21-gear hybrid with straight handlebars. On the bike there is a pannier (on each

side of the bike) and a handlebar map-document bag. There is a water bottle cage, a repair tool kit and a pump. A cycle lock is provided.

Helmets can be included but for sizing and hygiene reasons, we recommend that you bring both your own helmet and waterbottle. We aim to adhere to the above specification, but occasionally there may be variations.

A bike hire fee of 75 E has to be paid locally.

Maps & Route Notes

We provide specially written route notes, descriptions and map details.

General Information

Baths; Most French hotels do not have baths. usually en-suite facilities include only a shower.

Breakfasts: in countries such as France usually consist of coffee and croissant; sometimes, bread rolls, yoghurts, ham and cheese as well. If you want more for breakfast then we would suggest you purchase some food the night before. It is important for you to tell us if you have any dietary requirements when you book your holiday so that we can inform the hotels.

Single Supplements: are payable on most of our tours. The single supplement guarantees the privacy of your own

Accommodation & Meals

7 Continental Breakfasts and 5 Dinners are included. Dinners normally include entree, main course and dessert and are particularly wholesome, normally prepared by your host. Occasionally the meal may just consist of 2 courses. Picnic lunches are not included in the tour cost but are available from hotels or can easily be obtained from local shops. We indicate in the route notes where there are suitable restaurants or cafes for lunch stops, or recommend you carry food if there are none convenient to the trail. Double occupancy with private facilities:

Night 1: In a 2* hotel inside **Avignon's** fortified centre. This is an attractive small town hotel on a quiet boulevard, only 15 minutes walk from all the sites and Palace of The Popes (B&B).

Nights 2, 3 & 4. In Fontvieille . Here you stay in a lovely old 2* logis de France hostellerie, with a swimming pool and a great restaurant run by Madame & Monsieur Bounoir. They concentrate on using local ingredients to produce some very traditional and authentic Provençal dishes.

Nights. 5, 6 & 7. In L'Isle sur la Sorgue At a fairly modern 2* star hotel, with air conditioning and swimming pool. The patrons make all their own jams.

Note that pools maybe closed for cleaning or even emptied at certain times of year and we may not know this at the time you travel.

Arrival

First hotel: The starting point of the tour is in Avignon.

Arrival: Anytime during the day, rooms may not be available if you arrive early, but you will be able to leave your luggage and explore the town.

Travel: Full package customers fly with Scheduled British Airways services from London Gatwick to Marseilles Airport. Land only customers could use the cheaper Easyjet services, Gatwick to Marseilles. The even cheaper RyanAir services to Nimes are also worth considering. Transfers to and from Avignon TGV / SNCF are not included for both Full Package and Land Only customers. If you are flying into Marseilles with B.A. or Easyjet: This is relatively straightforward: From Marseilles Provence Airport you take a bus to the Aix TGV station from where (nearly every hour during the day) you can take a TGV to Avignon TGV station.

Marseille: <http://www.marseille.aeroport.fr>

The travel time for the bus that goes from the Marseille airport to the Aix TGV station (closer than Marseille train station) is about 15 minutes and the one-way price is about 5 Euros. Buses leave every 30 minutes. After that the TGV from Aix to Avignon TGV is 20 minutes duration. Then from the Avignon TGV, take the blue shuttle bus into town. The shuttle bus fare is around 1.5 Euros.

room, however, rooms can at times be small and in some places may not enjoy the same facilities as double/twin rooms.

Language: Note that you will not necessarily come across people speaking English. Remember you have left home to find things different bring a phrase book, try to learn a bit of French

Luggage: When arriving at hotels, your luggage may have been taken to your room awaiting your arrival. However, don't be surprised if your luggage is waiting for you at reception.

If you are starting from Marseilles Gare Saint-Charles (i.e in town at the SNCF-French Railways) there are normally trains every 1 to 2 hours to Avignon, taking around 30 mins on the TGV. Non TGV services are also possible but take around 1.5 hours.

If you are flying into Nimes with Ryan Air:

Nimes: <http://www.nimes.cci.fr>

There is an Airport bus that goes from the Nimes airport to the Nimes SNCF station. The travel time is between 15 minutes and 30 minutes (depending on traffic).

The one-way price is 5 Euros. Buses leave after the plane's arrival, and don't hang around too long! The train from Nimes SNCF to Avignon Centre is 35-45 minutes and costs about 8 Euros.

Travelling from Paris: This is also quite straight forward! The TGV from Paris Gare de Lyon takes only 2hours 40 mins.

For train times from other places you can check out links on the Sherpa website or visit the French Railways website at www.sncf.com. Check train times before travelling.

End of Tour: Taxi to train station at La Sorgue included. Train to Marseilles or elsewhere not included

Itinerary

(Note: B: Breakfast included, D: Dinner Included).

Day 1. Arrival in Avignon. Stay inside Avignon's fortified city for the first night. Discover the beauty of one of Provence's great cities. From the "Palais des Papes" to the "Pont d'Avignon," a stroll through history. Night Avignon.

Day 2. Ride from Avignon to the Alpilles, and Fontvieille (45km) via the Monastery Saint Frigolet (12th century) which takes its name from the thyme ("ferigoulo" in Provençal), which grows wild on the hill sides. It's most famous pilgrim was Anne of Austria who went to pray for an heir to the throne of France...the future Louis XIV. Night in Fontvieille. (B, D)

Day 3. Ride to les Baux de Provence, St. Remy de Provence and back to Fontvieille (45 km).

Baux is a wonderful 10th century AD, a wonderful hilltop town that belonged to the Grimaldi family until 1790. Today, Prince Albert of Monaco retains the honorary title of Marquis of Les Baux. From there drop down into Saint Rémy de Provence for a stroll to discover several 15th / 16th century mansions or to have a drink under a plane tree (almost as old as the buildings). Night Fontvieille. (B, D)

Day 4. A relaxing day trip to Arles, returning to Fontvieille (30km) (Wednesday is market day) Discover Van Gogh's second home and the city's Roman center. With its baths, theatre and remarkably preserved amphitheatre. There is also a rather beautiful Mediaeval cathedral and square. Night Fontvieille. (B, D)

Day 5. Fontvieille to L'Isle sur la Sorgue (55km).

Ride into the heart of the Baux valley through the typical provencal village of Maussane. Enjoy the centre's cafés and producers of local wonders like the 17th century Cornille mill where you can taste one of Provence's best olive oils or try a tapenade at Jean Martin's. Arrive in L'Isle sur la Sorgue, Provence's antiques capital...

Night L'Isle sur la Sorgue. (B, D)

Day 6. A day in the Luberon (62km)

This takes you along little roads, through wonderful villages from Gordes to Roussillon. Bucolic

settings for a wonderful day. Night L'Isle sur la Sorgue. (B, D)

Day 7. Another luberon ride (42km) A day to discover some of the lesser known villages in the Mont de Vaucluse including Venasque that overlooks Mont Ventoux, perched at the summit of a rocky outcrop, classed amongst one of the "most beautiful villages in France." The village boasts a beautiful baptistery believed to be the oldest in the region.

Night once again in L'Isle sur la Sorgue. (B)

Day 8. Trip ends after breakfast in L'Isle sur la Sorgue.

Transfer to nearby train station. (B)