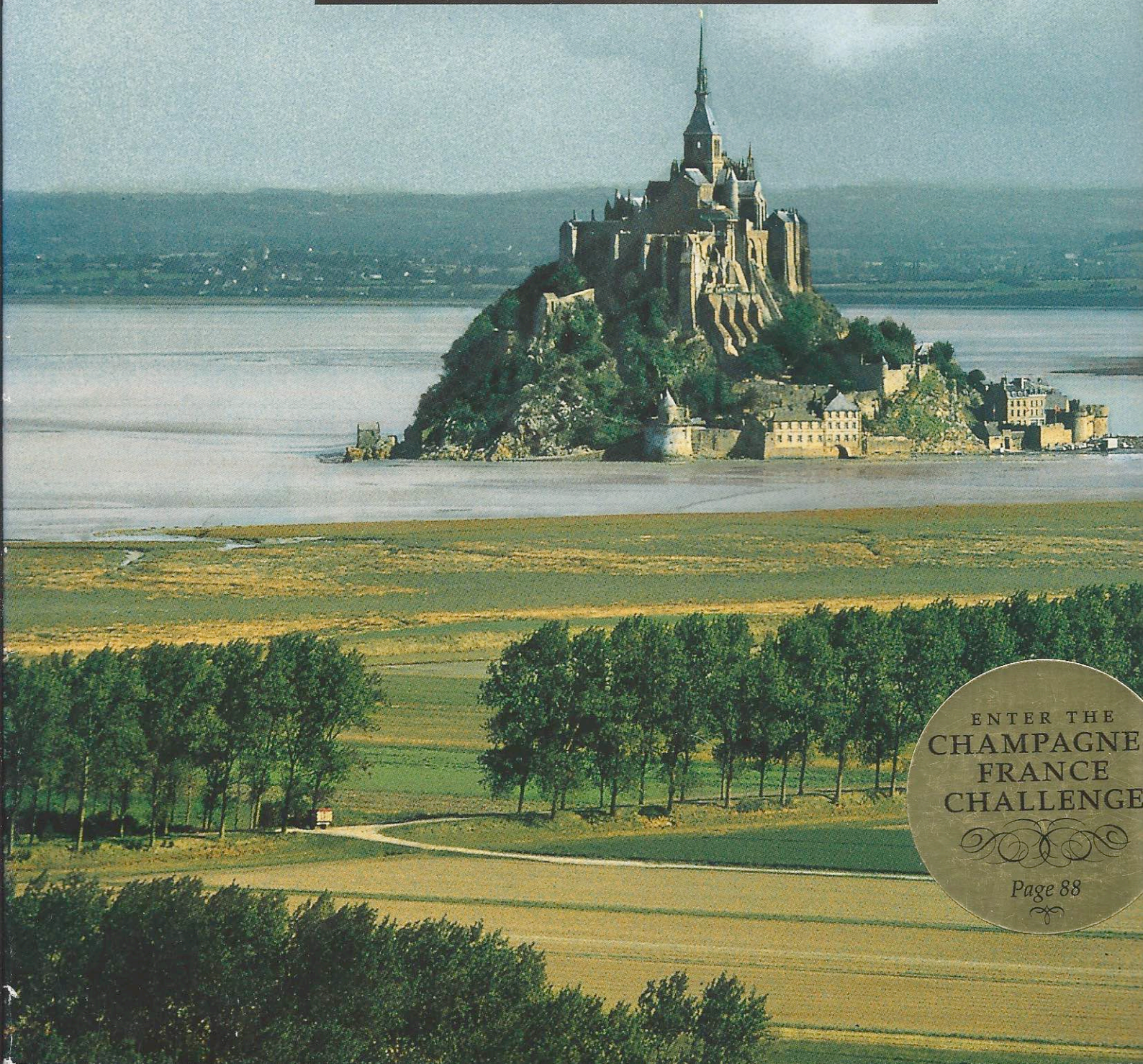


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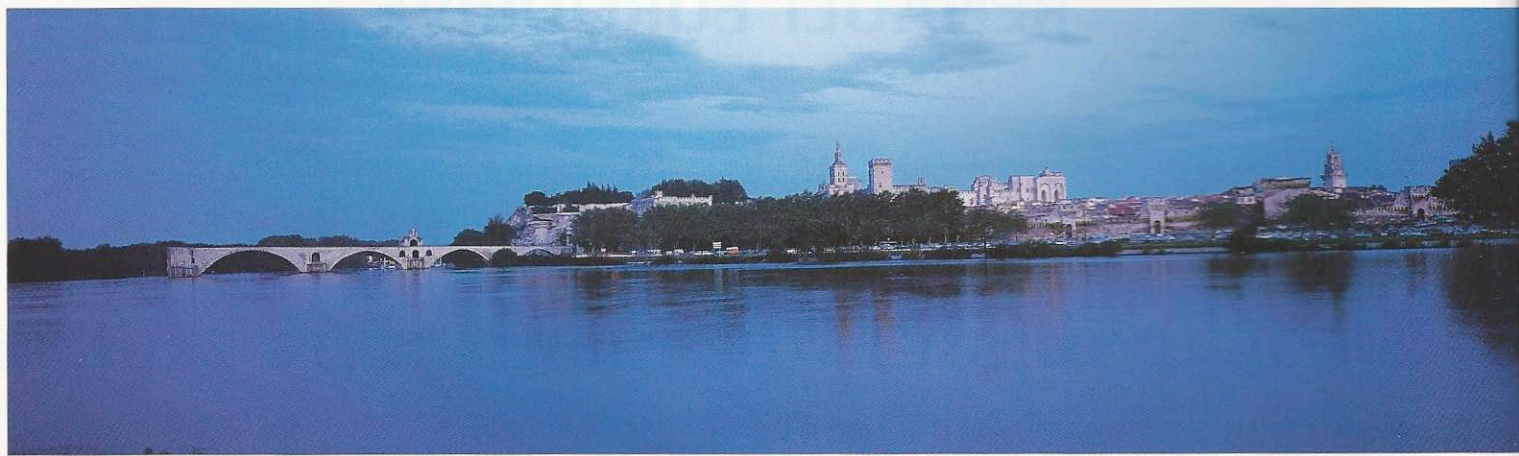
FRANCE

C I T I E S O F H I S T O R Y & A R T



ENTER THE
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Practical information and budget travel tips to make your stay in France more enjoyable

SIMPLE AND SENSUAL [PROVENCE — LANGUEDOC-

ROUSSILLON] Mediterranean lands where the air seems softer, the colors brighter, the song of the cicada more enticing than anywhere else on earth.



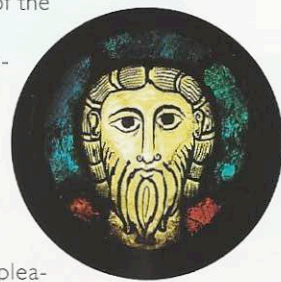
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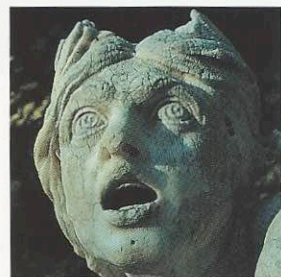


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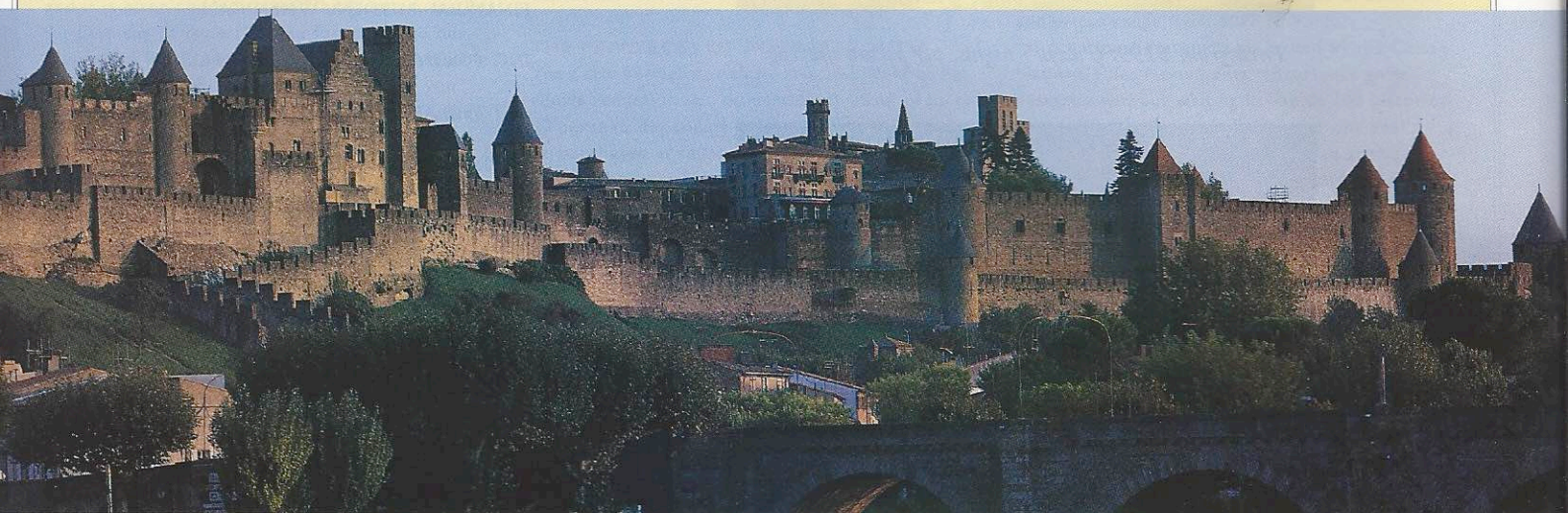
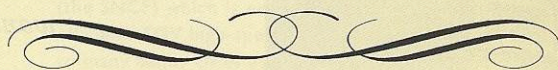
CHATEAUX COUNTRY] legends of love and enchanted palaces with gardens as never there were. BY RICHARD DE COMBRAY. 60



Cover: Mont St-Michel, in the Bay off the coast of Normandy and Brittany. Cover and page 4 photography by Russ Schleipman.

PROVENCE

LANGUEDOC-ROUSSILLON



Provence, ripe with its own scents and flavors, a mix of honey, olives, rosemary and lavender, and such heady color—piercing blue skies, hillside villages bleached white by the sun, deep green stripes of vine. Languedoc-Roussillon, proud in its invitation to touch the rocky walls of those ancient castles, to wander its wild hillsides or its Mediterranean shores. Why is it that a place so tangibly sensual always seems somehow to elude those—warriors, writers, painters, lovers, bewitched visitors—who try to capture it?

My own love affair with this land of passions began a long time ago, in a village whose name I

recklessly did not note, and which I have never been able to find again.

Its portrait is etched in my mind, every fine detail clear. A friend and I, weary of the main road, climbed an out-of-the-way hillside in our little car. The day was filled with sunshine; home was still cold and dreary, but spring had come to southern France. The village was tiny and crafted of ancient stone, the cafe sleepy, the view of sea and vines and olive orchards breathtaking, the meal simple but sublime—a seafood salad, a chilled bottle of crisp dry rosé wine, a parrot on a branch who kept asking for our bread...

Let your eye sweep across the map of southern France, east to west like the swing of a scythe: from the stirring profile of Sisteron, high in the Provençal Alps, through the wild Verdon Canyon, across the Vaucluse and the hilly Luberon, taking in the charmed cities of Aix-en-Provence, Avignon, Arles, Nîmes, Narbonne, Montpellier and the walled fortress of Carcassonne.

History flows through this southern sweep. The Romans, who left their imprint of temples, amphitheaters, wines and olive groves. The Cathars, who believed in gods both good and evil, and who built their doomed castles on

magnificent arid peaks. Knights and troubadours, who sang of courtly love. Popes, who fled Rome and tried to manage a sprawling, squabbling church from afar. And the people of the south, countless generations of them, who had in common a dogged attachment to the land. They still do.

The literature of the south is redolent with the aromas of the land—Jean Giono, Frédéric Mistral, Marcel Pagnol. Artists have been obsessed by it—Picasso, Braque, Van Gogh, Derain, Matisse and Cézanne, who all painted the windswept red-rock hills and the Mediterranean villages of Provence and Languedoc-Roussillon.

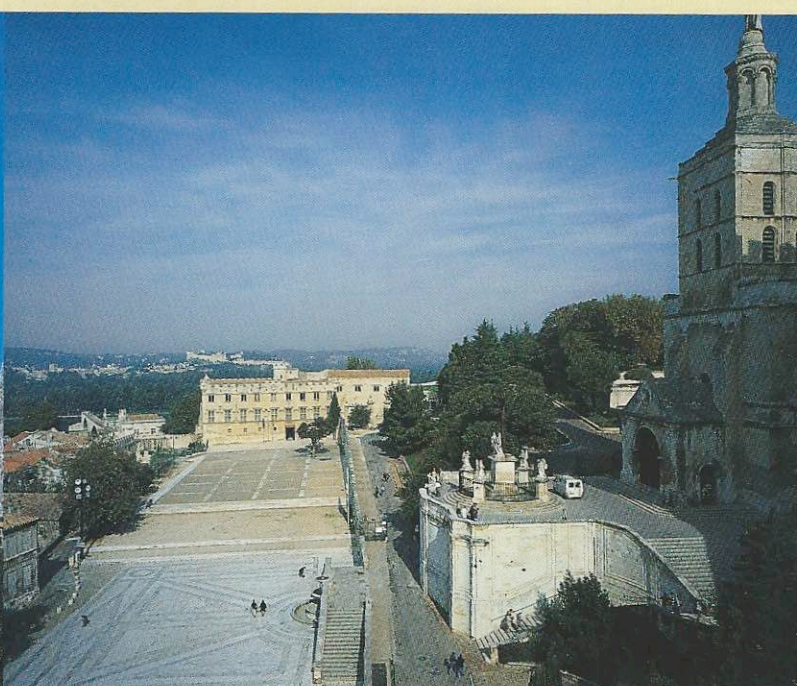
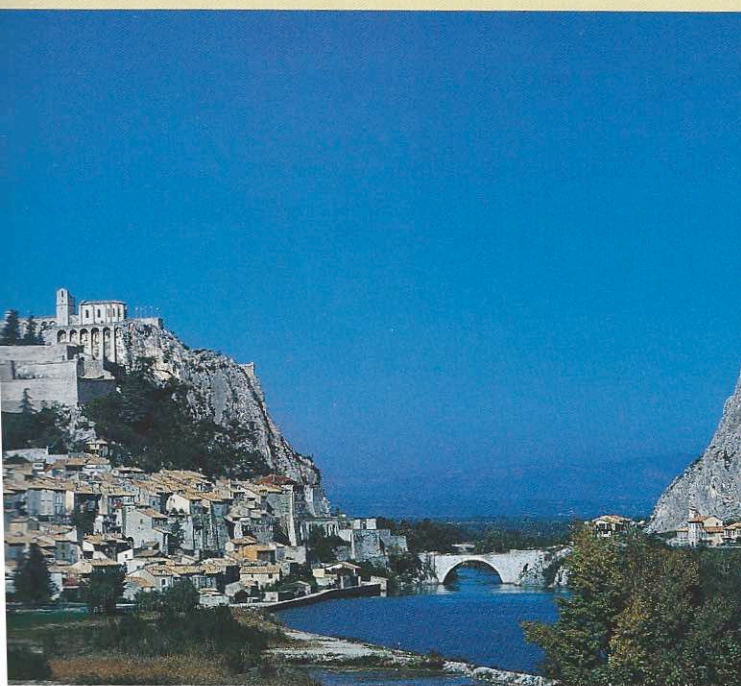


Simple and
sensual...
the air
is softer, the colors
brighter, the
cicada's
song more
enriching.

Opposite: The walled city of Carcassonne.
This page: Moustiers-Sainte-Marie, at the
entrance to the Verdon Gorges in upper
Provence, celebrated for its faience.



Above left, the 16th-century Clock Tower in Place de l'Hôtel de Ville, Aix-en-Provence; right, Place de la République, Arles, with City Hall, St-Trophime Church and the obelisk from the ancient Roman Circus. Below left, the medieval city and citadel of Sisteron on the Durance River; right, Place du Palais des Papes, Avignon. Opposite, Les Antiques, Roman monuments at St-Rémy-en-Provence.



Paul Cézanne grew up in Aix-en-Provence, and his paintings come to life just east of the city, on the road to Mont Ste-Victoire, the mountain he painted in all its moods. The hills around Aix are still there, little changed. So are the narrow roads lined with poplar trees and flowering villages, and farmers driving carts heaped with olives or apples or red peppers, depending on the season. And Cézanne's studio is still here, just as he left it when he died in 1906.

Aix is synonymous with that lusciousness of life that the south embodies. (It was once voted France's sexiest city!) Every

the future King Louis XIV that it started a fashion in Paris.

St-Sauveur Cathedral, adjoined by a lovely Romanesque cloister, has duplicate sets of closed doors: its beautifully carved 16th-century oak doors are hidden behind false panels, and the exquisite 15th-century triptych of *The Burning Bush* by Nicolas Froment hangs closed on the wall—both will be opened by the guardian on request.

Aix might have been invented for the pleasure of the idle stroller, so full is it of charming streets and sights—the old Mazarin quarter around the fountain of the Four Dolphins, the Granet Museum, the

marshland famous for its wild horses, its bulls, its flamingos and its *gardians*—the Camargue cowboys whose wide-brimmed black hats and white horses are often seen in Arles.

The city was an important crossroads at the height of the Roman Empire, and is graced with an amphitheater that was the largest in Roman Gaul. Known as *Les Arènes*, the amphitheater is still very much in use today for the bullfights that are a local passion, as are the ruins of the Roman Theater. The Roman world truly comes alive at the excellent new Ancient Arles Museum, with its superb collection of Roman sculpture and its marvelous scale models of Roman Arles, including a working water mill and an extraordinary boat-bridge across the Rhône. Provençal natives treasure the Arlaten Museum, created by poet Frédéric Mistral, who did more than anyone else to preserve the Provençal language, the *langue d'Oc*, and record many of the customs of this tradition-rich region.

One of the most famous residents of Arles was Dutch painter Vincent van Gogh, who spent more than two years in Arles and nearby **St-Remy-en-Provence** trying to capture the light and colors of the south. For a while he was joined by the French artist Paul Gauguin. Two of their paintings of *Les Alyscamps*, Arles's Roman cemetery, are remarkably similar: Gauguin's is a canal view, and Van Gogh's depicts the long tree-lined avenue with its stone sarcophagus, as if the two artists had worked back-to-back.

Encircled by its huge ramparts, **Avignon** is a mere 25 miles from Arles, but in some ways centuries removed. The historic glory of Avignon was during the Middle Ages—most specifically the critical years between 1309 and 1376, when a series of French-born Popes fled Rome and ruled Western Christendom from their palace in Avignon, and the following years

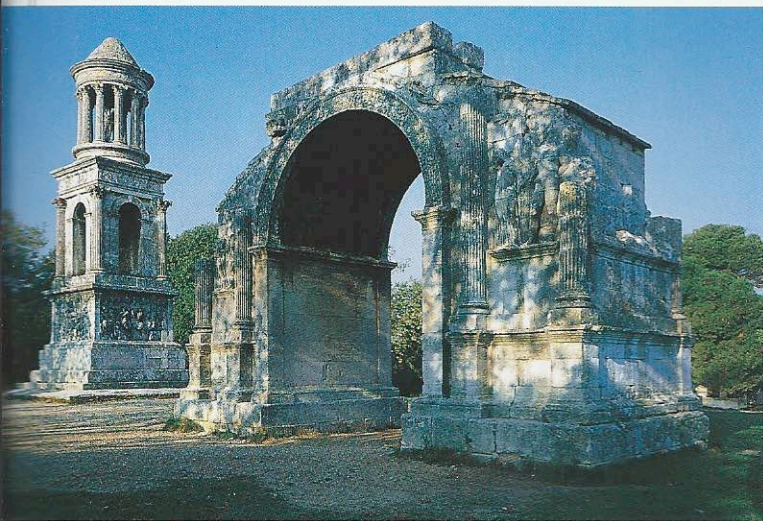
of the Great Schism, when the anti-popes continued to reside here until 1403. The Papal Palace is indeed magnificent, an immense maze of rooms and staircases, with its long, echoing Great Audience Hall and Great Chapel. In the small Deer Room, beautiful 14th-century wall paintings depict tapestry-like scenes of hunting and fishing.

The former archiepiscopal residence, the Petit Palais, is now a museum with a wonderful collection of paintings, including works of the medieval school of Avignon. The *Livrée Ceccano*, a palatial cardinal's residence, is now the city library. The Reformation was partly a reaction to such opulence, but earlier efforts at reform can also be found in Avignon, such as the Penitents' Chapel, a lovely small church next to the canal, which contrasts sharply with the papal splendors.

The famous-through-song Avignon bridge, the Pont St-Bénézet, or rather, the half of it that is left, was the victim of several Rhône floods, but also of a 17th-century squabble between king and pope, who couldn't agree on who would pay for its repair.

Little visible is left of Avignon's Roman heritage, but the tree-shaded Place de l'Horloge, filled with restaurants and cafe terraces, was the site of the old Roman Forum; today it is still Avignon's lively center of activity, never more so than in July and August during the Festival d'Avignon, one of the most important theater, music and dance festivals in Europe. (Avignon is theatrical even off season—I caught beautiful mime show with popely robes of purple on the steps of the palace square.)

The Luberon and the Vaucluse fill a triangle formed by Aix-en-Provence, Avignon and **Sisteron**, whose citadel guards a strategic pass that provides access from the Alps to the sea. For the Romans, this was a stop on the Via Domitia that linked Italy to Spain—



Aixois's second home is a cafe, most often one of those lining one side of the Cours Mirabeau—that long, inviting arcade of plane trees where Cézanne and his friend Emile Zola once sipped their *pastis*.

The *hôtels particuliers* across the shaded avenue were built of local golden stone in the 17th and 18th centuries, when the newly rich in this important administrative center grew out of the narrow streets of the old town. There are 160 of these elegant homes throughout Aix, many of which hide wonderful architectural treasures behind their closed doors: a stairwell trompe l'oeil painting by Jean Daret in the Hôtel de Châteaurenard was so admired by

flower market in the Place de l'Hôtel de Ville. Not to mention the dozens of wonderful restaurants—one eats very well in Aix, as throughout the south.

Arles has been famous for its Saturday market since antiquity, so what better place to search for Provençal herbs? I found myself comparing hundreds of baskets of dried herbs, less aggressive than the fresh: ginger, coriander, paprikas of varying strengths, and of course the herbes de Provence mix of rosemary, thyme, bay leaf, savory and marjoram or oregano. There was stall after stall with more than 50 varieties of olives; speckled, coco, rouge and fava beans; and bags of rice from the Camargue, the nearby



Napoléon marched through on his way from Elba to Waterloo (he stopped for lunch). Today, the old town of Sisteron remains a medieval maze of narrow houses often linked by vaulted ramps.

South of Sisteron, a fine side trip takes you to the pretty town of **Moustiers-Ste-Marie**, clinging to a deep cleft in the hillside and renowned for its beautiful faience. From Moustiers, the drive through the Grand Canyon

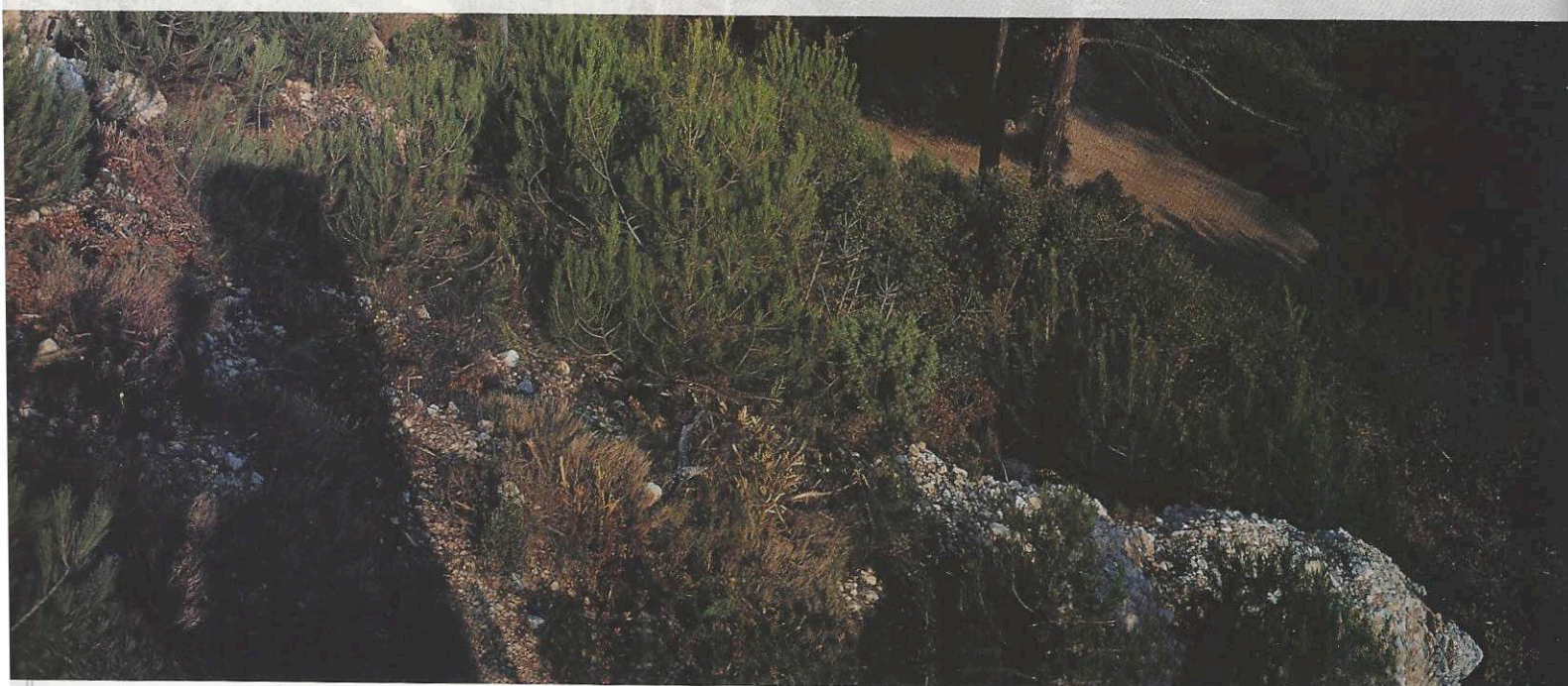
of the Verdon is one of the most spectacular in France, along the properly named *Corniche Sublime*. Farther south, in the Var, you'll find a series of delightful villages: **Bargemon**, with its fountains, mimosas and orange trees; hilltop **Seillans**, with pebbled and flowering streets leading to its château; and **Fayence**, province of potters and artisans, where each October the String Quartet Festival fills

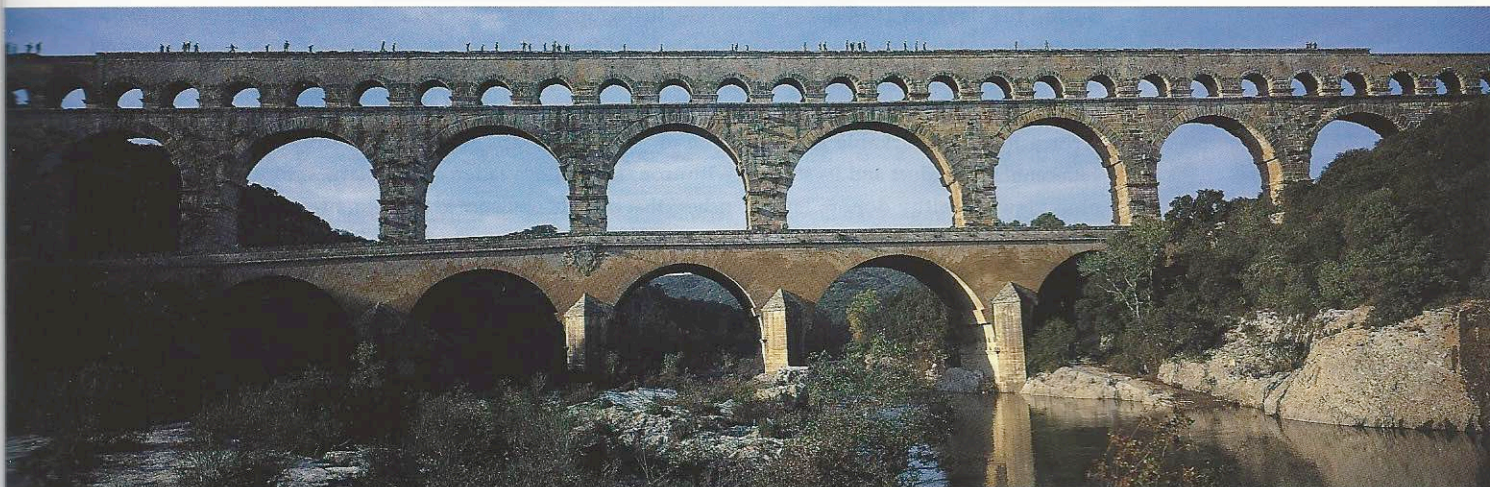
the Romanesque, Gothic and Baroque churches of town with the "beautiful music of autumn."

Westward from Sisteron, on the route toward Mont Ventoux, **Sault** is at the wild heart of the Vaucluse, famous for its fields of lavender, its herbs and its honey. Here you'll find the shop of the André Boyer family, acclaimed for their nougat candy made only with lavender honey. A few steps away there is a tiny shop

where a group of local women sell *herbes de Provence*, Provençal fabrics and their own homegrown products.

This page: Mont Ste-Victoire near Aix-en-Provence, a favorite subject of the painter Paul Cézanne. Opposite top: Near Nîmes, the three-tiered Pont du Gard, a Roman aqueduct built about 19 B.C. Opposite center: The Roman Maison Carrée and the modern Carré d'Art in Nîmes. Opposite bottom: The 17th-century Arc de Triomphe in Montpellier.





The Rhône divides Provence from Languedoc-Roussillon; not far across the river from Avignon you will find the aston-

islands near Uzès, a delightful town whose asymmetric Place aux Herbes and surrounding streets have been restored; their covered

Theodorit Cathedral has a wooden balcony along the sides, hastily put up when the Huguenots were forced to recant by attending Mass, but there was not enough room for them in the church.

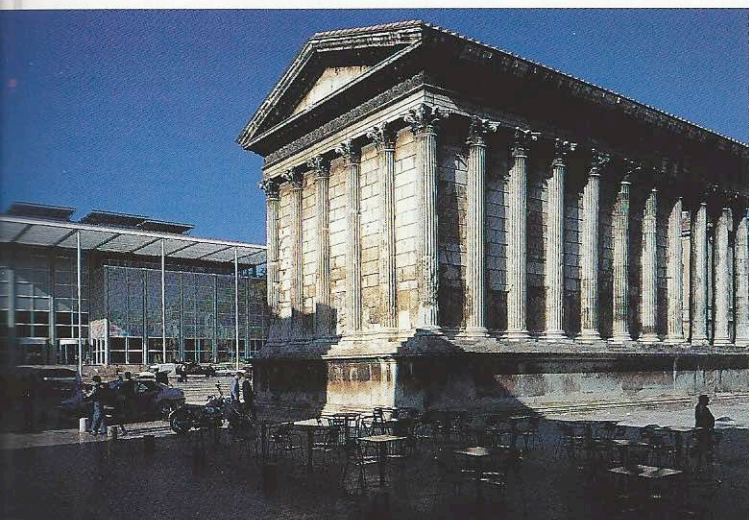
Nîmes is justifiably famous for its Roman amphitheater and temple, both the best-preserved examples of their kind in the world. If you look carefully at the amphitheater you will find traces of the medieval village (population about 2000) that once filled the interior. Today it is used for bull-fights and festivities, especially during the celebrated week-long Féria each spring. The temple, called the Maison Carrée, is a pure architectural gem; across the street Sir Norman Foster's modern glass arts center, the Carré d'Art, provides a beautiful reflection. Roman influence can be traced even to the courtyards of some of the fine 15th- to 17th-century town houses of

Nîmes, such as the Hôtel de Bernis.

Nîmes was the center of the Huguenot rebellion, which spread north to the textile villages of the Cévennes. One of the fabrics they made was denim—de Nîmes—a workman's fabric. The Old Nîmes Museum has a denim jacket from the 14th century!

Early on, Montpellier was a thriving port of commerce with the Orient; its merchants of spices and medicinal herbs founded, in the 13th century, what became the first medical school in Europe, as part of the University of Montpellier. (One student was the writer Rabelais, in the 1530's.) Throughout the Middle Ages the city enjoyed a lively mix of merchants, craftsmen and scholars.

In the 17th century a powerful aristocracy grew up, and the hilly streets still attest to their wealth: the spacious Place de la Comédie, and the noble homes near rue Foch (many of whose courtyards are open



ishing three-decked Pont du Gard, a Roman aqueduct built in 19 B.C. This marvel of Roman engineering was meant to carry water from

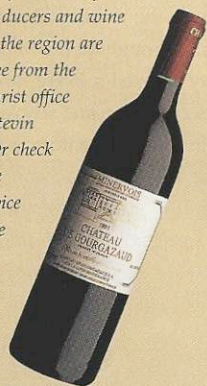
arcades now boast a series of shops and a lively Saturday market. In the 17th century Uzès was a hotbed of Huguenot resistance. St-



HOSTEVIN

To make it easier for visitors to get to know—and to taste—the wonderful wines of Languedoc-Roussillon, more than 200 wine growers in the region are now members of Hostevin, an association with strict standards that guarantee quality and service. Cellars bearing the Hostevin seal offer visitors a warm welcome, impeccable surroundings and free wine tastings conducted by a competent specialist ready to explain the fascinating mysteries of the winemaking process (languages spoken by the staff are posted at the door). Visitors to Hostevin cellars can be sure of finding all the amenities, from proper stemmed wineglasses and wines at the correct temperatures to access for the handicapped and information about local gastronomy and tourist sites.

Many Hostevin members have extra added attractions as well—wine museums, art exhibits, gardens with picnic tables. Most of all, Hostevin winegrowers are remarkable individuals who love their wines and love making them known to others. Lists of Hostevin producers and wine maps of the region are available free from the regional tourist office and all Hostevin members. Or check box 2 on the Reader Service card on page 109.



during the day). In 1688 the city fathers decided to cap Montpellier's glory with the monumental Promenade du Peyrou, a two-story terrace today remarkable for its 18th-century aqueduct and its stunning view. Wealthy donors later accounted for several of Montpellier's many museums, among them the Atger Museum and the Fabre Museum, one of the richest in France.

The aristocratic good life extended into the countryside, where Montpellier's nobility built their *folies*, country houses for romantic dallying or just summer retreats; the Château de la Mogère and the Château de Flaugergues, with its

ed the first grape vines; Narbonne likes to boast that French wine had its beginnings here. By the 12th century the troubadour Bertrand de Bar sang of "the great ships studded with iron, the galleys laden with riches" that brought opulence to this "good city."

Narbonne's St-Just Cathedral, like most, was constructed over several centuries—but in this case, it was never completed, so it has no nave. The overall effect is curious, because it is one of the tallest cathedrals in Europe, and its truncated form makes it seem even loftier. (The organ is the largest in France.) The former episcopal palaces and a 14th-century cloister now house the

perhaps the most dramatic of the many Cathar ruins in the area.

Carcassonne was one town spared when the Cathars were destroyed. The walled city is the largest fortress in Europe, built on a site continuously occupied for 2500 years. Although often threatened, the city never suffered major damage; it stands today exactly as it did in the Middle Ages, encircled by its double walls and 38 towers.

The round towers were built by the Romans, who used Carcassonne to protect the strategic passage to Spain. When arrows became the medieval weapon of choice, the towers, too open, were suddenly useless; some were hastily rebuilt—too hastily, as can be seen from their disquieting tilt. The wooden guards' walk is an early example of pre-fabricated design: the pieces were numbered and stored until the enemy was sighted, when the walkway could be quickly installed along the walls.

The wind whistles through those towers in Carcassonne, and suddenly I noticed the scent of grapes—a village nearby had begun its harvest and the fermenting juice pierced the air with each breeze. It reminded me of another hillside, in Provence, where the clouds were racing and the wind carried the scent of rosemary and thyme and pungent olives. The heady concoction was too much. I closed my eyes and listened to the song of a cicada who, like the south itself, has resisted all our attempts to capture or tame it.

WRITTEN BY ELLEN WALLACE

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JEAN-MICHEL VOGÉ



The Château d'Aguilar in Languedoc wine country.

exotic gardens, offer a glimpse into the studied elegance of that world.

Some of these *folies* are still surrounded by the vineyards of Languedoc, whose wines have been growing steadily better in the last decade as producers opted for quality over the quantity of yore. Today many of them are very good indeed; at the Mas de Saporta in Montpellier, a wine center with its own restaurant, you can sample the best of the region's quality wines.

The vineyards run straight down to Narbonne, founded in 118 B.C., when the city was still on the sea. This is where the Romans plant-

Archaeological Museum, the Art and History Museum, and the treasury with its resplendent 15th-century tapestry of the Creation. The city's Roman maritime history is recalled by an impressive curiosity just put on display—a 2000-year-old wooden anchor, the oldest in the world.

Inland from Narbonne the landscape grows wilder. This is the austere country of the Cathars, who dominated the region in the 12th- to 13th centuries, and whose ruthlessly bloody defeat left scars that lasted centuries longer. The Château de Lastours, in the Montagne Noire, is