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# TIMELESS Travels

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FOR LOVERS OF TRAVEL, ARCHAEOLOGY AND ART



**Garry Shaw** goes in search of the popes in Provence and finds a ruined chateau, a world heritage listed historic centre in the town of Avignon, and has a little dance on the famous Pont Saint-Benezet to celebrate

**S**ur le Pont d'Avignon, l'on y danse, l'on y danse, sur le Pont d'Avignon l'on y danse tous en rond' goes the French children's song, composed in the 19th century, but based on a much older tradition of songs about the Provençal city's famous bridge. Seemingly known by every French-speaking person on earth, the lyrics translate as, 'On the Bridge of Avignon, we dance there, we dance there, on the Bridge of Avignon, we dance there all in a circle.' Much to my embarrassment, until planning my trip to Avignon, I hadn't heard of this song, but for my Francophone friends, it was a completely different story: to them, I'd be embarking on a pilgrimage. 'First see the papal palace,' they said (popes? in Avignon? I thought, keeping quiet about my ignorance). 'And then go stand on the bridge, sing the song and dance in a circle. It's what you're supposed to do there.' Well, I figured, if it's what you're supposed to do. Why not?

A short time later, I was driving through the Provençal countryside towards Avignon. Endless vineyards passed by, their fields lined with vines in tidy rows, following the curves of the hills. Tempting advertisements for wine tasting and tours also whizzed by, offered by almost every domaine along the road. Vines have been cultivated in this region since antiquity, with both sides of the River Rhône famous for its produce; the local soil, filled with large round stones, is said to be perfect for wine growing: the stones absorb heat during the day, and release it during the evening. Though wanting to sample the patrimoine of the passing domaines, I resisted stopping until one famous name caught my attention: Châteauneuf-du-Pape, just over 10 km north of Avignon, a village known for its fine red wines, but also for its long history.

### The Pope's new castle

Situated on top of a hill, there's been a fortified village at Châteauneuf-du-Pape for around a thousand years. The village church, Our Lady of the Assumption, still retains parts of its 11th-century core. As I wandered the winding narrow streets, a group of tourists on bikes – mainly retirees – flew by, unfazed by the uneven slopes. Other people, less active, sat outside the village's numerous wine bars and restaurants. Their glasses were half-filled and glowing red in the intense Provençal sunlight. From there, I climbed to the top of the hill, passing houses, thin and tall, built of rough, yellow blocks. Each window was covered with a wooden shutter, many painted bright blue. At the peak was the imposing ruin of a castle.

Built in 1317, but in ruins by the 15th century (and part blown-up during the Second World War), all that remains of Châteauneuf-du-Pape's castle is an imposing three-storey wall, and beside it, a further two-storey wall running along the hilltop. Long, thin windows and doorways punctured the stonework across its levels. A row of evenly-spaced square holes allowed me to imagine the second



Previous pages:  
Panoramic view of  
old town and Papal  
palace in Avignon,  
France (Image:  
Andrii Gorulko)

Left: Drawing of  
Avignon from the  
Album Laincel  
dating from the  
second half of the  
17th century

Right: The  
vineyards around  
Châteauneuf-du-  
Pape (Image: ©  
Garry Shaw)

storey's vanished wooden flooring. Standing beside the castle, I looked out across the vineyards, over the salmon-coloured roof tiles of the village houses and towards the distant mountains. They faded blue in the atmospheric haze. I could see why Pope John XXII wanted to build his castle here. But could the region's famous beauty have been his only reason?

Sadly not. The actual reason why a pope – the Bishop of Rome let's not forget – ended up building a castle in France is far more political: in the late 13th century, relations between King Philip IV of France and Pope Boniface VIII were – to put it mildly – strained. Philip IV had removed the clergy from any role in legal matters, and to raise funds for his military campaigns, he'd started taxing the church (a big no-no). This angered Pope Boniface, who among other things, issued a Papal Bull declaring the pope above all secular powers (i.e. pesky French kings). The feud continued in one form or another until Boniface's death in 1303.

After all this drama, the bishops hoped to elect a pope who would be less aggressive towards France. Their first choice, Pope Benedict XI, died within a year, leaving them to elect Pope Clement V in 1305, a man born in the Kingdom of France, and so less likely to cause trouble. In 1309, the papal court moved to Avignon. With instability in Rome, the move was expected to be temporary. It lasted nearly 70 years. A result of this 'Babylonian captivity' – as the phase became known – was that the Kingdom of France and the papal court become increasingly close; indeed, Clement V appointed nine French cardinals, making it almost certain that his own successor would be French. He was right – that's tactical divine inspiration for you.

Avignon was probably founded in the 6th century BC by the Phocaeans – Greeks from the city of Phocaea in western Anatolia, the same group that had also founded nearby Marseille. Afterwards, it passed into Roman hands (in fact, there's still some Roman remains visible around the city), and in 1303 it became a university town. It might have remained a small, yet pleasant centre of learning on the banks of the Rhône, if not for the period of papal occupancy; it was over these tumultuous decades that the city was transformed into 'the other Rome.' It never looked back.



But – you may well ask – if Avignon was so unimportant, why did Clement decide to move there?

The pope, like any medieval monarch, owned various states in Europe; his territories were primarily in Italy, but he also held land along the River Rhône, known as the Comtat Venaissin. This had been awarded to the papacy in 1229 at the end of the Albigensian Crusade. Avignon lay just outside this county, but was better located than the towns within its borders: the Bridge of Avignon provided easy access into the Kingdom of France, across the river, and was well-located for communication. Both Rome and London were within two weeks travelling time. Paris could be reached in just five days. The pope's non-ownership of the city didn't matter either: Avignon belonged to Charles II, duke of Anjou, a papal vassal (and also King of Naples and Count of Provence), so, he wasn't going to cause Clement any trouble. Now that the Pope had chosen a new home for himself (and Christendom), he just needed a place to live.



### The Palace of the Popes

I entered Avignon's historic centre, walking through an imposing crenellated gateway penetrating the city's ramparts (themselves rebuilt under the popes in the 14th century). My first feeling was surprise: beyond the Porte de la République was an open paved space with grandiose buildings, each widely spaced, but by their appearance, built in the 19th century – it wasn't the confined streets of a medieval hub that I was expecting. Unperturbed, I continued along the tree-lined Cours Jean Jaurès, making my way past brasseries (and the requisite Irish bar), each spilling out onto the pavement, their tables and clientele shielded from the sun by canopies. A side road led to the Temple Saint Martial, a Protestant church since the late 19th century, but originally a 14th century monastery.

Soon after, Cours Jean Jaurès morphed into Rue de la République, its facade modelled after the style of 19th century Paris. I passed an imposing 17th century baroque chapel, now home to the archaeological collection of the Musée Lapidaire,

and crossed the pedestrianised Place de l'Horloge and the neoclassical Hôtel de Ville that dominates it. After navigating a short street, my target stood before me: the Palace of the Popes.

The sudden, dramatic shift in architectural style was jarring. Set within the huge open space of the Place du Palais, the palace dominates the view, stretching from end to end of the square, and rising as if to touch the sky. Austere, aggressive, eye-catching, yet a mishmash of architectural styles, it was as if the palace's architects had repeatedly changed their minds during construction: *'Here I'll have a square tower,'* one might have said, staring at its far end. *'Over there I'd like a spire. And why not throw in some arches at the bottom for fun.'* As the official seat of the popes, I'd expected the harmony of a cathedral, the artistry of a Michelangelo, but this was a fortified mass of severe stonework, as inviting as a tank. To lighten the mood, an electric tourist train rode by, halting beside me. It dropped off the next wave of visitors; the palace was extremely popular, despite its aggressive appearance. It is also significant: the world's largest

*Above: The Palace of the Popes (Image: Jean-Marc Rosier, www.rosier.pro, CC BY-SA 3.0)*

gothic palace, it was included on France's first list of historic monuments in 1840, and inscribed on UNESCO's World Heritage list in 1995.

None of this existed when Pope Clement V arrived in 1309 – he'd stayed at the local Dominican monastery when in town. His successor, Pope John XXII, lived in the Bishop's palace (and built his castle at Châteauneuf-du-Pape). He'd seemingly had no complaints with the accommodation options available. But none of this was good enough for John's successor, Benedict XII: he wanted a palace fit for a pope. In 1335, Benedict – a Cistercian monk who'd spent a chunk of his pre-Papal career chasing Cathar heretics – had the Bishop's Palace removed. He then hired architect Pierre Poisson to create his new official residence: a place that in itself – with its chapels and apartments – would replace all the palaces and churches of Rome.

All of this must have been quite a shock to the local residents. After all, Avignon was little more than a sleepy university town in the preceding centuries. Now the pope was living down the road,

and planning to stay for some time. People flocked there from across Europe, and the city prospered. You couldn't move along the narrow streets for cardinals, artists, intellectuals, merchants and friars. Time to craft some papal souvenirs to flog to tourists and pilgrims.

The famously austere Benedict XII died in 1342 and was replaced by Pope Clement VI. With more opulent tastes than his predecessor, Clement had his own palatial dreams, and wasn't too impressed by Benedict's severe construction. So he did what any reasonable person would do in his position: stick a new palace on the side of the old one – one a bit more gothic, a bit more trendy and, perhaps most importantly, one that would be fabulously expensive (and look it); the papal purse had saved quite a bit of money under Benedict XII, so why not spend it? Clement hired a new architect, Jean de Louvres, and work continued (with new frescoes even added to Benedict's old halls). From 1335-1352 (with a short and understandable break for the Great Plague of 1348), the entire area was one massive building site – apparently the largest



in the western Christian world. And by the end of 1352, there was one large behemoth squatting on the hill in Avignon. It had two wings: the 'Old Palace' of Benedict XII and the 'New Palace' of Clement VI, both joined at the middle. It might not have inspired religious devotion, but it did inspire awe. That, and the feeling of being tiny before an unimaginably powerful force.

Leaving the sunlight behind, I followed a group of tourists into the belly of the Gothic beast. The sound of clashing audio-guides filled the air. I passed through the New Palace's courtyard and into the Old Palace's cloisters, known as the Court of Benedict XII, and from there, into the Consistory Hall. At the far end of this majestic, rectangular space, the popes once sat enthroned, their cardinals alongside them, illuminated by a bay window near the high wooden ceiling. It shed light directly onto their illustrious seats, and adamantly nowhere else. Here, the assembled elite discussed politics, made judgments, and held trials and public audiences. Sadly, the hall's elaborate frescoes were lost to fire long ago, leaving its grey stone walls a poor replacement for its once opulent splendour. To enliven the space, the curators had filled it with models, artefacts, gargoyles, medieval doorways, and videos. A skull with a large hole, the result of a violent encounter with a crossbow bolt, rested in one display.

You don't get as wealthy as a pope without looking after your treasures, I discovered in the Lower Treasury Hall in the Pope's Tower. This is why they hid their most precious belongings and documents in four pits beneath the floor. These could only be accessed by raising the covering slabs, sealing the pits, with a hoist. Plus, for extra security, only three people had permission to access the treasure: the pope himself, the chamberlain and the treasurer. The pope would certainly know where to go if something went missing. Peering into one of the pits, the darkness illuminated by a neon glow, I could see that it still contained treasure today: a pile of Euro coins and notes (and the occasional dollar), thrown inside by visitors, patiently awaited retrieval.

Leaving the palace for a few moments, I explored the Lower Garden, where Pope Clement VI once had a fountain installed (long since gone, though a vending machine does provide some modern liquid refreshment, though far less beauty). Providing shade, the palace walls rose steeply, embellished with tall arched niches pointed towards the heavens, like dents left from the fingers of a giant. The garden once housed the palace menagerie – exotic animals presented to the popes as gifts, including birds, and more unusually, a lion and a camel. As I meandered, I wondered if the lion ever drank from the fountain and imagined bishops enjoying camel rides.

*Above: The Palace of the Popes and the tower of Philippe le Bel (Image: Jean-Marc Rosier www.rosier.pro, CC BY-SA 3.0)*

*Right, top: A crossbow bolt created the hole in this man's skull. On display in the Consistory Hall in the Palace of the Popes (Image: © Garry Shaw);*

*Right, bottom: Looking up at the Tour de la Campanie from within the Palace of the Popes (Image: © Garry Shaw)*

*As the official seat of the popes, I'd expected the harmony of a cathedral, the artistry of a Michelangelo, but this was a fortified mass of severe stonework, as inviting as a tank. To lighten the mood, an electric tourist train rode by, halting beside me. It dropped off the next wave of visitors; the palace was extremely popular, despite its aggressive appearance*

My next stop was the Grand Tinel, the papal banqueting hall – another plain, rectangular space, but with a massive fireplace and an arched wooden ceiling. Every religious festival here was an excuse for a tremendously expensive party. Meals were notoriously luxurious. Only the finest and most expensive food was served, and untold barrels of wine were consumed – one chronicler even describes a fountain of five different wines at one event. For the diners, meals were also a time to exchange expensive gifts; it must have felt like Christmas every day. Servants prepared the food in the neighbouring kitchen – a small room with a tall cone-shaped tower – and brought it through to the hall, where the final preparations were made behind a partition screen, now lost. Like sticking your food in the oven to keep it warm, the medieval servants used the hall's huge fireplace to keep the tasty dishes heated until the guests were ready to be served – a useful feature when the meals were five courses long. Only after the courtiers had assembled and the pope seated beneath his elaborate canopy could the food be brought out. And security was always a concern: the maitre d'hotel used a probe to test all the food for poison, and only the master carver and the pope were allowed to use a knife.

Although much of the palace now lacks decoration, a few rooms have managed to survive relatively intact, among them the papal apartments. These were decorated under the luxury-loving Clement VI by his artistic director Matteo Giovanetti. The papal bed chamber is filled with hues of blue, swirling vines bearing leaves of different colours and wildlife. Its floor is formed of multicoloured painted tiles. The adjoining Stag Room, meanwhile, was used by Pope Clement VI as his study. Painted in 1343, and all set against a backdrop of deep green trees filled with birds, men hunt with falcons and dogs; there's a stag hunt and bird-catchers; and a group of men fish beside a pool, shown with an attempt at perspective. From these private chambers, the popes had easy access to the Great Chapel. Dedicated to Saint Peter and Saint Paul, there, beneath its high vaulted ceiling, they performed mass, and held major events, including funerals.





Its current state isn't due to a lack of modern conservation, but because Avignon's 17th-century residents stopped repairing it. The bridge was often damaged by flooding, necessitating frequent (and expensive) repairs. In the end, it was left to become a romantic ruin

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### City of Churches

In 1348, when it had become abundantly clear that Avignon would remain the papal seat for some time, Clement VI decided to buy the city from the Neapolitan royals. He offered Joanna I of Naples 80,000 florins for it – apparently an extremely good deal for the pope, but not for her. She accepted regardless. This was probably because she needed Clement's help: Joanna was on the run, accused of murdering her husband, a Hungarian royal, and sought to be free of the charge. Clement launched an investigation, and she was found not guilty. Avignon now became its own *Comtat* (county) within the surrounding Comtat Venaissin. But despite Clement's investment, only a few decades later, shortly before the death of Pope Gregory XI in 1378, the papal court returned to Rome, ending the Avignon papacy. Seven popes over seven decades had ruled from 'the other Rome.' Even afterwards, however, Avignon and Comtat Venaissin stayed papal territory. Churches continued to be constructed and it remained a centre of religious importance and learning. Only in 1790, at the time of the French revolution, did Avignon and Comtat Venaissin formally become part of France.

After leaving the Palace of the Popes, I decided to explore the streets behind and beside the palace. This is where all the narrow medieval streets and alleys can be found. Wide enough for a single vehicle, these wind through the city, often leading to tiny squares. Wandering without purpose, I came across intriguing restaurants, cafés and shops – stores selling local art, books, clothing, music. With over one hundred churches spread throughout the city, it felt that there was one on every corner.

At Place Saint-Didier, I admired the Gothic exterior of the 14th century Collégiale Saint-Didier. At Place Jérusalem, there was a 19th century synagogue. The Petit Palais, built by a cardinal between 1318-1320 in the north of Avignon, and later used as the Bishop's Palace, is now a museum and art gallery; the Livree Ceccano, on Rue Laboureur, is another cardinal's palace of 14th century date, and is now Avignon's municipal library. Every street was filled with history. I could have wandered for days, but I had one more location to visit: it was time to dance on the Bridge of Avignon.

### The Bridge of Avignon

I passed through an archway in the ramparts and emerged onto the busy Boulevard du Rhône. The river, just beyond the passing cars, sparkled in the sunshine. To my right, stood the Bridge of Avignon, also known as the Saint-Bénézet Bridge. It has been there, in one form or another, for around 800 years. Once the major crossing point between the two banks of the River Rhône, spanning 900 metres over 22 arches, today, much of it is lost. It juts out only a short distance over the river, like the pier of a Victorian beach resort. Only four of its arches remain, its first spanning only the Boulevard du Rhône. Cars whizzed by beneath. Its current state isn't due to a lack of modern conservation, but because Avignon's 17th-century residents stopped repairing it. The bridge was often damaged by flooding, necessitating frequent (and expensive) repairs. In the end, it was left to become a romantic ruin.

I accessed the bridge through a gatehouse, connected with a visitor centre (where you can

*Previous pages: Pont Saint-Bénézet (Image: Chiugoran, CC BY-SA 3.0)*

*Left: Street in historic centre of Avignon (Image: © F. Olliver)*

*Right, top: Detail from the Pérussis Altarpiece, the earliest depiction of the bridge, c. 1480*

*Right, middle: The north side of the bridge with the Chapel of Saint Nicholas (Image: Nikon2, CC BY-SA 3.0)*

*Right, bottom: The ruined bridge as depicted by Joseph Vernet, 1756*

watch a video recreating the bridge's original appearance). I walked along its stone surface, thinking of how this simple bridge had contributed to Avignon's prosperity; without it, the popes would never have moved to the city. And it was hard to imagine that only a few centuries ago, I would have been crossing from papal territory into France.

Along the bridge stood the Chapel of St. Nicolas, dedicated to the local patron saint of mariners. It was divided across two levels: the lower section being mostly of late 12th century date, and the upper section late 14th century. Until the bridge's abandonment in the 17th century, the relics of Saint Bénézet were stored in this chapel. According to legend, Bénézet, when a young shepherd, was inspired by god to build a bridge at Avignon. The local people and the bishop were sceptical of his plans and challenged him to carry a heavy stone block to the river. Miraculously, he succeeded. With this first block in place, the local people formed a bridge-building brotherhood, and the first Bridge of Avignon began to take shape.

I'd picked up a handy audio-guide in the visitor centre, which explained the bridge's history and construction. It also played *Sur le Pont d'Avignon* in different musical styles; if you've ever wanted to hear the song performed as reggae, this is your chance. Songs about the bridge have existed since at least the early 16th century, most with different melodies and lyrics. Originally, these placed the dancing underneath the bridge, probably on an island in the Rhône, rather than in the confined space above.

It was only in the 19th century that the version famous today came into existence, and the dancing relocated. No one on the bridge around me seemed to care. Everywhere, tourists of all nationalities were spinning and singing: 'Sur le Pont d'Avignon, l'on y danse, l'on y danse.' At least one person in every group was filming the others with a mobile phone, preserving the moment for eternity. There, standing above the sparkling waters of the Rhône, the medieval city peeking over the ramparts, my time had come: I had to join them, after all, what can you do? As they say, 'when in the other Rome...'



## Getting there

## Flying

Seasonal flights depart from Southampton, Birmingham and London direct to Avignon Airport. There's also flights from Manchester, London and Edinburgh to nearby Marseille. Eurostar now also provide a year-round service to Avignon from London's St. Pancras International (though not on a daily basis).

## Visas

Members of the EU do not require a visa to visit France. Those from Canada, USA and Australia can also enter without a visa, as long as they stay for less than 90 days.

## Getting around

Avignon's historic centre is easily navigable by foot, but local buses also provide a convenient means of transportation, as do bikes, which can be rented at various locations. The city's bus station connects it with various nearby towns and cities, such as Marseille and Orange.

Avignon is also served by two train stations: Gare Avignon Centre is primarily for local trains, while Gare Avignon TGV connects the city with Paris and Nice, among other locations.

## Weather

Avignon has mild winters, with temperatures on average reaching 9°C. In the summer months, highs reach around 28°C. Rainfall is moderate, and the city is subject to Provence's famous mistral – powerful winds that sweep through the region in the winter and spring.

## Holidays

(In 2016): January 1 (New Year's Day), March 28 (Easter Monday), May 1 (Labour Day), May 5 (Ascension Day), May 8 (VE Day), May 16 (Whit Monday), July 14 (Bastille Day), August 15 (Assumption), November 1 (All Saints' Day), November 11 (Armistice Day), December 25 (Christmas Day).

## The Essentials

**Time difference:** GMT + 1

**Language:** French is the official language of France, and English is also widely spoken.

**Electrical current/plugs:** Plug sockets have two round pins and have a current of 120V AC, 60Hz.

**Religion:** The vast majority of France's population are Christian.

**Water:** Tap water in France is safe to drink, and bottled water is widely available.

**Politics:** France is a democracy with a president as Head of State.

## Money

**Currency:** The currency in France is the Euro (EUR; symbol €) = 100 cents. Notes are in denominations of €500, 200, 100, 50, 20, 10 and 5. Coins are in denominations of €2 and 1, and 50, 20, 10, 5, 2 and 1 cents. ATMs are widely available throughout France.

**Credit cards:** MasterCard, American Express, Cirrus, Maestro and Visa are widely accepted.

**Traveller's cheques** are widely accepted. To avoid additional exchange rate charges, travellers are advised to take traveller's cheques in Euro, Pounds Sterling or US Dollars.

## Short history of Avignon

Avignon was probably founded in the 6th century BC by the Phocaeans – Greeks from western Anatolia in modern Turkey – and flourished due its strategic location on an important trade route. The city passed into Roman hands in 121 BC, though few remains can be seen from this phase today. From the 3rd century AD, Avignon entered centuries of tumult, during which it was frequently attacked and occupied by different groups, including the Vandals and Goths. By the start of the 2nd millennium, relative calm had returned, with the city now part of the Kingdom of Arles, ruled over by the king of Naples. It grew in importance from 1309-1378, when the papal court moved from Rome to Avignon; during this time, Joanna I of Naples sold Avignon to Pope Clement VI for 80,000 florins. The city now became its own comtat (county), associated with the neighbouring Comtat Venaissin, itself papal territory since 1229. During the French revolution, in the last decade of the 18th century, Avignon was incorporated into France.

## Shopping

In addition to its olives and olive oil, the region's fine wines are a must buy, particularly those from Châteauneuf-du-Pape, just a short distance from Avignon. The city is also famous for its gastronomic tradition, with local flavours dominated by garlic, herbs, and tomato sauce. Papalines – pink chocolate liqueurs – are a famous local speciality. Many regional products can be discovered in Les Halles, Avignon's covered market.

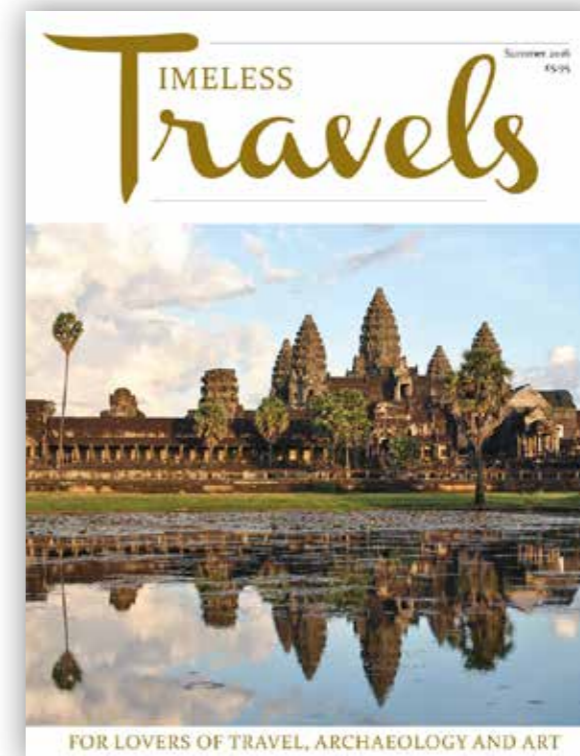


Market day in Avignon  
(Image: © F. Olliver)

For more information about visiting Avignon see

See [www.avignon-tourisme.com](http://www.avignon-tourisme.com)

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