

SPEAR'S

Adventures in Avignon

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With Eurostar's new regular service to Marseille, Avignon's Palace of the Popes is less than six hours away from London, and from there the Provençal village of Gordes is within easy reach, says Andrew Harris

Since Eurostar's 1994 debut, a journey that seemed to have exploded straight out of H.G.Wells' futuristic imagination is now routinely undertaken with the accustomed resignation of travelling a few stops along the District Line. Since 2015, however, Eurostar has been quietly exploring an exciting new frontier, with a direct, six-and-a-half-hour service to Marseille up to five times a week, although as of this year, reduced from a year-round service, to one operating between May and September.

Once out of the tunnel, the first stop doesn't materialise until Lyon, four hours and forty minutes away, but it's the third destination in-between the two big conurbations, that is perhaps the most alluring; Avignon, which Eurostar had already been servicing since 2002, though only once a week during summer. This atmospheric, relentlessly charming Provençal outpost, draped in historical and cultural significance, with a population no bigger than Stevenage and encircled by some of the most bucolic landscapes in Europe, is now readily accessible in just five hours and forty-nine minutes from London.

In under six hours, you've travelled as far south as Florence, nudging 200 mph, like an arrow straight to the heart of a Mediterranean milieu of terracotta roofs, goats cheese, and Van Gogh vistas. Anyone familiar with the drive will be aware of that switch that's flicked somewhere south of Lyon. As if by divine intervention, the skies clear in minutes, and a southern sun is suddenly warming up your clammy rain-sodden soul. To be able to arrive at that meteorological north-south divide before you've hardly had time to digest breakfast is extraordinary. To accomplish it without recourse to the mayhem of London's airports (not that any currently fly to Avignon!) is simply wonderful. Deposited, somewhat discombobulated by this rapid transit, into Avignon TGV station a few kilometres from the city, there are two courses of action; rent a car and head for the hills or transfer straight into town. An ideal itinerary encompasses both.

Avignon is of course, famous for what's left of its ancient bridge and as the place to where the intrigues and instabilities of 14th-century politics, led the papacy to relocate from Rome between 1309 and 1377. The three remaining arches of the bridge now support a daily deluge of middle-aged tourists damaging their already dysfunctional knees while videoing each other dancing 'sur le pont'. A modern touristic phenomenon probably best observed just the once. Le Palais des Papes (the Palace of the Popes), the world's largest medieval gothic palace, rises dramatically out of the main square. A Lord of the Rings-like vestige of a world of hooded penitents, miracles on demand, papal indulgences and papal over-indulgences.

The principal attraction of Avignon, though, is probably its rabbit warren of streets, cobbled squares, ancient churches, and rickety old tables and chairs spilling out into laconic shaded afternoons of gastronomic indolence. In Les Halles, its busy central market, red-faced locals jabber away over oysters washed down with a glass of Rhône white. Beautiful pale stone buildings transcending unknown centuries lie in wait around every corner in an idyllic urban tableau recognisable across an arc of southern Europe from Sicily to Seville.

Any trawl of top-tier accommodation options will very quickly alight upon La Mirande. A former cardinal's residence and listed building, it's oldest part, like the Palais des Papes to which it is adjacent, dates back to the 14th century. After almost two hundred years in the same family, it was remodelled into a hotel in 1987 by the Stein family who still oversee the operation today. The style and substance incorporate this historical heritage into a twenty-six-room property of immense charm and character. A nonchalant atmosphere of style-infused grandeur, redolent of a film set, has both feet planted firmly in its bourgeois past. Textile wall coverings ride roughshod across doors in that uniquely French interior design statement, secret entrances lead to spiral stone stairways; there's a listed 15th-century ceiling in the main restaurant, and a gorgeous garden.



During summer months, the restaurant spreads out across a terrace and into this picture perfect candlelit horticultural hideaway, whose understatement merely serves to overwhelm. July is also host to the Avignon Festival, founded, as was its Edinburgh counterpart, in 1947. Like Edinburgh's fringe, 'Avignon Off' consumes the entire city with the performing arts more eclectic offerings with concomitant pressures on accommodation.



La Mirande has long featured prominently within Avignon's gastronomic identity. Regular cooking classes hosted by celebrated visiting chefs are conducted in the huge downstairs 19th-century kitchen, while the restaurant boasted a Michelin star for many years. That coveted accolade has been absent since 2012, but with a talented young chef de cuisine bedding into his third year, that might change. Florent Pietravalle arrives with an impressive culinary pedigree, notably four years with French restaurant royalty, Pierre Gagnaire, at his renowned three Michelin starred Parisian flagship in Rue Balzac.

Dinner in the former Cardinal's home, blessed by a holy trinity of a beautiful alfresco setting, Pietravalle's skillset, and Didier the sommelier's oenological romp through the nearby Châteauneuf-du-Pape vineyards, makes for a meal of memorable dimensions.

An extremely extensive Carte des Vins incorporates over 60 white, and nearly 200 red, Châteauneuf-du-Pape possibilities, alone!



The cooking is indisputably impressive, sophisticated without being precious. Dishes such as red mullet on a risotto of Sardinian pasta, in a bouillabaisse sauce, dancing a delightful duet with a sublime organically produced white Châteauneuf-du-Pape, Chateau La Nerthe, imply that a star could, indeed perhaps should, shine again at La Mirande.



Within an hour of Avignon, lie some of the most achingly beautiful stretches of countryside found anywhere. This is classic Peter Mayle, truffle hunting, lavender scented, gastro-junkie, herb-crusted heaven, and while the pull of Provence is nothing new, its allure is timeless.

In 2010, a French government initiative formalised the creation of a hotel category superior to five star; the Palace accreditation. Of the 24 current palaces, one is in the French Caribbean, and a further 18 are scattered between Paris, the Mediterranean coast and Courchevel. Among the remainder, one lies just 40 minutes from Avignon: La Bastide de Gordes.

Hanging precariously off a hill like a drunk, La Bastide, in the village of Gordes, whose sister property, Les Airelles, is one of the Courchevel Palaces, has just one problem. It's almost too beautiful. The village of Gordes, somehow wedged into a cliff face on the lower slopes of Mount Ventoux, is not only ludicrously pretty to look at, it also affords spectacular far reaching views to look out from.



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La Bastide, however, is not one building, but several village properties, sequentially integrated over the years, into a 10,000- square-metre, multi-level, self-sustaining luxurious private universe. As such, if you don't wish to emerge into the village until tranquillity is restored, after around 6 p.m., you don't need to.



The property, which was acquired by Stéphane Courbit's LOV group in 2014 and subjected to a meticulous modernisation, has re-emerged with 34 individually styled rooms, six suites, and a separate three-story house. The resultant vast meandering network of interconnected opulence is a far cry from the nearby village where Courbit was raised by his postal worker single mother.

Currently number 120 on France's rich list, this buccaneering businessman has his eyes on a real palace for his next Palace venture: Versailles, no less, where a joint venture with Alain Ducasse is nearing fruition.

La Bastide De Gordes is as forthright as La Mirande in promulgating a leitmotif of 18th-century splendour. While La Mirande's allure looks as though it has slowly poked its way organically through centuries of ecclesiastical chaos and post-revolutionary restyling, La Bastide's is more polished and glitzy. Reproduction work conjoins with original features, architecturally salvaged materials, and over 2,000 painstakingly sourced, historical artworks.

The unassuming hotel entrance, just off the main square of the village, conveys no indication of what lies within. There are in fact, ten floors: two above, and a further seven below working their way down the hillside. This deceptively huge property embodies a plush bar, three restaurants, including Pierre Gagnaire's Michelin-starred Pèir, all with spectacular views from their respective terraces.



There are indoor and outdoor pools, a dedicated children's zone with its own pool, and a sumptuous Sisley spa. Dramatic, dimly lit corridors interconnect 1600 square metres of plush purposeful pampering, like a super-stylish convent servicing a new silent order of self-indulgence.

There's a large dedicated space for weddings and other functions, a floor catering for conventions and corporate concerns, a sizeable indoor car park occupying a further level, and a four-bedroom private house, La Maison de Constance, with its own pool and garden, offering room service from Pèir. Yet the casual observer viewing this rambling collection of centuries-old stone buildings cascading down a village hillside would have no inclination at all of it being one unified entity, let alone how extensive or luxurious its internal components all are.



L'Orangerie bistro and La Citadelle restaurant impress with a quality of cuisine commensurate with that found in many restaurants already boasting Michelin stars. Service here and in all areas of the hotel is exemplary without being high-handed. Complementing the enthusiastic young sommelier on her choice of organic rosé, she merely points into the far distance at the village from whence it has emerged and enquires if we'd like to pop over and meet Nathalie the winemaker after lunch! We'd love to, but we also have a date with a very fast train, so that might have to wait until next time. And with this sybaritic sun-dappled diversion into decadence, just five hours and forty-nine airport-free minutes away (and yes, it was bang on time!), there most definitely will be a next time.

Andrew Harris regularly writes for Spear's

London St Pancras to Avignon in Standard Premier (First) from £199 return: www.eurostar.com

La Bastide de Gordes open April to October. Rooms from €400

La Mirande. Rooms from €315 (low season)