

# Provence



## Aix-en-Provence, Avignon, and Apt

Thursday, 27 September 2007

We left Didier and Nicole's on Thursday at about 10:30 am pretty much right on plan – they drove us to the Marseilles train station where we picked up our Europcar, a Peugeot 207 – something of a clapped out old bomb which was very dirty inside and reeked of smoke. Anyway – off we drove for the short trip to Aix-en-Provence

Aix is a wonderful old town; naturally somewhat touristco. The TomTom found our hotel, the Aquabella, with only a few wrong turns – it is smack dap in the middle of town. As we were not able to check in right away we had a quick lunch at a local bistro. After lunch we did a walk around the old town checking things out and getting our bearings. That evening we had dinner at a modern bistro (le 37 aka Deux Freres) – the meal was very good even though the restaurant was almost empty. The next day – we walked our feet off – visiting a museum (Garnet) and many old building and churches. We had dinner at a really small bistro, Le Petit Verdun, it was OK but not really value for money.

The Aquabella, a 3 star hotel is just that 3 stars – in spite of raving reviews on Trip Advisor, it was pretty ordinary. We rated the breakfast as a 4 out of 10 and only because we were feeling quite generous.

On Saturday morning we got up early to visit Paul Cezanne's studio before heading off to Avignon.

We arrived in Avignon just around lunch time and the TomTom found Hotel L'Horloge with only a few hiccups. As per usual we could not check-in right away so we had lunch at one of many cafes lining the town square on which hotel is situated. I managed to get our standard room upgraded 2 levels for only 10€ per night – thank goodness as even this room was quite small. The biggest issue is that there was only a bath with hand shower (no screen) – so the bathroom scored only 1 out of 10. The breakfast also only scored a 4 – looks like very ordinary breakfasts are par for the course in 3\* hotels. We booked the L'horloge and the Aquabella on otel.com for what seemed like good prices as breakfast was included where if you pay a la carte it's around 14€ – a total ripoff.

Anyway Avignon is also a wonderful ancient town full of interesting history – the highlight being the Palace des Papes and of course the Pont St Benezet (which of course was made famous by the song Sur La Pont D'Avignon). Again we spent our 2 days here walking around the old town and visiting the Palace – you could spend much more time here. For dinner – we had pizza one evening then pasta the next.

From Avignon, we headed off to Domain des Andeols – our LL package at a luxury retreat near Apt in Provence. It is one of Alain Ducasse's resorts in the Provence. After a bit of hiccup on arrival, we checked-in to our 'house' – a fully resorted gite – totally wonderful. The ambience of the resort is 10 out of 10. As it had a kitchen we decided to just buy cheese, cold cuts and bread for dinner on our first evening as we were staying 5 nights – 2 of which included dinner in the wonderful restaurant.

On Tuesday – we arose early to a wonderful sunrise – we had breakfast in the restaurant watching a hot-air balloon sailing over the hills in the distance. The breakfast only scored a 6 – something of a let down for a place of this calibre.

We spent Tuesday visiting “Colorado” a park near Rustrel – a wonderfully ocre colored rock formation. From there we drove to Bonnieux – another ancient and picturesque town perched on a hilltop. We had a nice lunch then walked around before returning to our gite. We had one of our gala dinners on Tuesday evenings – a gourmet feast of a amusebouche, cucumber soup, chicken and risotto followed by a goat's cheese then a dessert to die for.

On Wednesday, it was quite cloudy, however, we still drove over the Mont Ventoux pass – made famous by the extremely steep ascent in the Tour de France. We drove down the other side to Malaucene for lunch – then back to our hotel. It was bread and cheese that evening to make up for the excesses of the previous night.

On Thursday, we went to see two local gites (which we considering renting the following year) and were quite disappointed by them particularly given their 4\* rating. The first one was quite depressing; but the second at least had a lot of character – however, I in particular was looking for something a bit more swish. We then drove to Gordes for lunch and while it is a very picturesque village it is totally touristsco. We had lunch at a cafe in the church square and felt it was poor value for money. After lunch, we tried to find the Village Des Bories but had to settle for a drive by due to the confusing signage. It is a medieval village of stone dwellings built like igloos. From here, we drove to Menerve, another historic village, made famous by the book “A Year in Provence” by P. Mayle. After this we drove to Saignon just a few km's from Apt and found it to quite delightful – we stopped at a outdoor cafe beside a large fountain for a drink. While we were sitting there a group of horses and riders passed by and stopped to water there horses at the fountain. Back at the hotel – we had our second included dinner and felt it did not meet the same standard of the first one.

On Friday, our last full day, we took off on another road tour going to Sault which is the starting point for the drive alone the Gorge de la Nesque which sits under Mount Ventoux. The 36 km drive from Sault to Malaucene is a quite hairy with many wonderful vantage points of the gorge – there are also a number of delightful tunnels which look hand-carved. From Malaucene we continued on about another 10km's to Vaison-la-Romain – yet another medieval scenic village. Since it was already past 1:00pm we had lunch at a small resturant (Le Bataleur) – and had the 2 course menu for 16€ which was excellent value. The man who served us (whom we assumed to be the owner) had lived in Australia – we did not get the whole story but he had travelled extensively.

We arrived back at the hotel just before a major thunderstorm hit – thank goodness we are planning to stay in tonight for cold cuts and cheese.