

8: From Vienne to Avignon

Up at seven this morning – I can only just about see the time on my watch as it is so dark in the dormitory. After a welcome shower, I discover that I have the place to myself as the two French cyclists have left. As it is lashing rain outside, I wash some clothes at a leisurely pace. Fortunately the rain stops when I finish, and I go out to buy some food. I leave by the back door and, as there is nobody around, I leave it ajar. When I return, I find the door locked. Hungry by now, I sit on the steps and eat some bread and pâté as best as I can, *en plein air*. Just as I am about to leave for a walking tour of the town, I bump into the caretaker, who unlocks an upstairs door for me so that I can come and go. I put my things away, take my camera, my cape and a notebook, and set off.

I head for the *Syndicat d'Initiative* but find it closed as it is Sunday. I draw a rough map of the town centre in my notebook and walk to the church of Saint Pierre, where I discover that there is a museum of Roman stonework. For nine francs I purchase a student ticket that admits me to four museums. In the church I find magnificent examples of Roman mosaic floors, statues galore, inscriptions on stone blocks and many other objects of interest. Although the church, complete with dust, cobwebs and large spiders, is in direct contrast with the fine museum that I have seen in Lyon yesterday, it is nonetheless very interesting – especially for its mosaic floors. Indeed, Vienne itself looks rather scruffy compared to Lyon, especially in this morning's gloomy light.

From the church I go wandering through the narrow winding streets to the magnificent cathedral of Saint Maurice, which is approached by a flight of steps. As I stand outside, admiring the intricate Gothic carvings on the façade, the bells begin to toll noisily, announcing the commencement of the 11 o'clock Mass. I amble inside, where I discover just a small congregation near the altar. An organ snarls as the priest enters, its sound echoing from the hard stone walls and vaults. The priest intones the opening prayers over the loudspeakers and, accompanied by the organ, begins to sing a shapeless hymn in an unmusical nasal voice. I quickly tire of this dreary display of piety and leave, conscious of the fact that I have failed to switch off my normal reactions to sights, sounds and situations when abroad.



Cloisters, Saint-André-le-Bas

I amble down the deserted streets and arrive at the cloister of Saint-André-le-Bas, where there is another museum. The church is enveloped in scaffolding, undergoing restoration. At the entrance, I hand my combination ticket to the girl at the desk, who is in the middle of helping a Japanese lad find a cheap place to stay. As I am able to give information about the youth hostel, I am drawn into the conversation. The girl is very chatty and informative, and tells us about the places that we can visit, adding details that are not printed in the brochures. After the Japanese fellow leaves, I continue talking to her. As she is a student of urban architecture, she is most enthusiastic about old buildings. I pay a quick visit to the fine old cloisters, which are about to close at midday, return to the girl and continue our conversation. We speak in French, but as she is anxious to improve her English, we switch to my native tongue.

She now tells me about the problems that she has encountered when trying to persuade the municipal authorities to preserve the old buildings of Vienne and other French cities. Her predicament sounds very familiar. She informs me that she is from the Vénissieux district of Lyon, where she studies, but she works here. She enjoys her job and has time to study in her little office. We part on good terms and shake hands; she encourages me to pop in again later if I am passing. It is pleasant to get into conversation with somebody like her, for cycling on one's own can be a lonely method of locomotion.

I go off in search of a cheap restaurant and find one that the girl has recommended. The locals are already in it, eating – always a good sign. For just 35 francs I enjoy an excellent meal of artichoke, meat with French beans, a delicious cold cream cheese and an apple. A lady joins me and we immediately get into conversation. She is a school teacher and is on a walking tour of this area. Like most teachers, she has long holidays and likes to travel every year. She has been in England and wants to go to Ireland. We spend a long time chatting in French; I am happy to relax and enjoy the conversation. The lady draws my attention to the fact that the southerners here are more jolly and friendly, and she is right, for all the locals in the restaurant are laughing, joking, saluting those who are arriving and leaving, and teasing the waitress.

At about two o'clock I say goodbye and walk down the street, the rue des Orfèvres, to admire an old house with an interesting inner courtyard and a tower that contains a staircase. Nearby is a similar house, but the courtyard is in ruins.



Church of Saint-André-le-Haut, Vienne

As I head off in the direction of what I have been told is an outstanding Roman theatre, I hear thunder and detect oncoming rain. I change direction and instead make for the more sheltered Musée des Beaux Arts, which is in the centre of the town. On the way I pass the Archeological Gardens of Cybèle, where more Roman ruins can be seen. Unfortunately the Musée is disappointing: it contains long display cases of uninteresting porcelain, Roman artefacts of no great interest, some rough-looking pots and vases, and a collection of mediocre paintings. Disappointed, I leave after a short visit and head for the Hôtel de Ville, which is a pleasant old building. Walking through the narrow old streets and climbing steps, I reach the fine but crumbling Church of Saint-André-le-Haut, which is one of the first Jesuit chapels to have been built. The façade looks almost the same as the more famous Jesuit church in Rome, in the Piazza del Gesù. The girl I have spoken to at the cloisters has stressed the importance of this particular church.

With the sun now coming out and going in, I retrace my steps to the Roman theatre and show my ticket at the entrance. I am rather disappointed to discover that the theatre has been spoilt by modern intrusions: scaffolding and railings to assist people ascending to the galleries and the large, ugly modern stage that has been constructed over the original one. However, I do realize that the theatre is indeed impressive. It is possible to climb to the top of the hill in order to view this ancient wonder from above, but I decide not to bother. Instead, I leave and wander through the warren of grimy alleyways, stopping now and then to poke my nose into courtyards. One of them is quite run down and contains a small community of what I conclude must be Turkish people. Children play boisterously and Turkish music can be heard coming from a window. A couple of large women with veils sit in a corner of the yard, doing needlework. The children stop to stare at the fair-skinned infidel and I move on.

Despite the slums and the scruffiness, I conclude that Vienne does have a certain charm of its own. Fascinated by what I observe, I continue my wanderings through the streets. When I find myself back at the cloisters again, it suddenly begins to rain. I take shelter in the entrance, where I have another long chat with the girl. We exchange addresses (I discover that her name is Renée) and I leave shortly after six o'clock so that she can count the money from the day's takings.



Temple of August and Livia, Vienne

As it continues to rain, I return to the hostel and pass the magnificent small Roman temple of August and Livia (any relation to Anna Livia, I wonder?). I stop briefly to admire this beautiful and intact temple. It has obviously been cleaned recently as the stonework is bright and free of blemish by pollution.

Back in the dismal hostel I throw off my wet clothing and sit down to write my diary. Despite the rain and the fact that Vienne has not quite lived up to my expectations, I have enjoyed the day – probably because of having the pleasure of mixing and chatting with people. Later, when the hostel is officially open, the Japanese fellow appears and we have a conversation in French. He is at present living and working in Tunisia, and now taking a holiday here in France.

After a simple knocked-up meal I start chatting to a couple of jolly Austrian girls who are doing their washing upstairs. I offer them some information about what to see in Lyon and invite them to move into the dormitory where I have now installed myself, as there is a window, some fresh air and light. The Japanese lad must be scandalized by my proposal, for he decides to stay in the dark, airless dormitory where I have spent the previous night. If he is scandalized, he doubtless will be horrified if I tell him of an incident that happened to me the previous year when I had hitch-hiked my way down to the Dordogne Valley. I arrived in Sarlat, where I knew there was a youth hostel just north of the town.

At the hostel, I found a note affixed to the door. It indicated that the key was in a small bag attached to the handle. I let myself in and made myself at home. By and by, a coach arrived and disgorged a classful of lively teenage girls and two female teachers. While preparing a meal, I chatted to the two teachers in French. We ate together and later, when the girls retired for the night, one of the ladies asked me if I was planning to stay overnight. '*Mais oui*', I said. But surely you know, *monsieur*, that the hostel is officially closed? '*Mais non*', I replied, genuinely perplexed. It turned out that, yes, it was closed, but the students had been given permission to stay here tonight – hence the key in the bag. The two ladies discussed the matter; by now they realized that it was too late for me to find alternative accommodation. One of them went up to the dormitory to have a look and returned. She told me that there was one bed free, near the staircase, which I could use. If I would wait until the girls were all asleep, I could creep up, sleep in the bed and leave early the following morning – *et voilà!* The plan worked; I left early in the morning and – I presumed – the girls were none the wiser.

This morning it is misty and gloomy, but thankfully it is not raining. I am up and out as early as possible, for I hope to reach Avignon or somewhere near it by this evening. I cycle southwards along a main road that follows the river Rhône, with mountains on either side rising above the mist like a scene in a Chinese painting. I pass industrial plants with factories and high chimneys, modern houses and apartment blocks, and railway lines. Fortunately all these begin to disappear after I have passed through the village of Sarras; they are replaced with a succession of vineyards and orchards with trees bursting with apples, pears and peaches. Beyond them are more spectacular mountains, some of them with a château or a small village clinging to their sides. As I make good progress on my way down to Provence, I notice that the scenery is slowly becoming more lush. However, there is always something modern and ugly to spoil the view, such as the supports and cables for electric trains at a point where I pause to admire the river.

I arrive at the small town of Tournon at about 12.30 and decide to stop for lunch. However, as every reasonably priced restaurant is full to capacity, I am forced to go on. This is a pity, as some of the back streets look interesting and there is a château that is worth visiting. The next village is Mauves, where there are two restaurants, but only one is open. It too is crowded, but there is a place for me. For 40 francs, including service, I enjoy an excellent meal that finishes with a huge and delicious peach. As everybody else has left by the time I have stopped eating, I help myself to another peach and a pear that have been left on another table.

When I resume my journey, the sun is out and now it is roasting hot. This is a welcome change, but in the meantime a strong wind has whipped up and now blows northwards, against me. This slows me down considerably and makes cycling very difficult. I pass the town of Valence, which is on the other side of the river, at about three o'clock. Although there is a youth hostel there, I decide to continue and see what happens. I realize that, because my progress is slowed by the wind, I will not reach Avignon today; if I am lucky, I may reach Montélimar and stay in a hotel. Another problem is that I am almost out of money – I only have 30 francs left, which means I will need to find cheap accommodation somewhere. As I have discovered, all the banks are closed today because it is the Feast of the Assumption.

After le Pouzin, I leave the main road by taking a left turn onto a quieter minor road that runs along the west bank of the Rhône. Now it clouds over and turns cooler. Just before I cross the river to join a main road on the east bank, I stop for a rest, eat my pear and drink some water, for I have become very thirsty.

I reach the other side of the river and continue southwards, towards Montélimar, on a very busy road, the N7. We have an N7 in Ireland, I remember. Here, the wind blows even harder and soon I become exhausted. Just as I approach the city I espy a camping site, where I think I may find cheap accommodation. A woman tells me that she has a double room for 60 francs, but will let me have it for 50. She takes all the French money that I have (a little over 33 francs) and two Irish pounds, which she will change in a bank.

I immediately regret coming here as the room is of poor quality, it is very noisy because of the traffic passing by, the showers are primitive and only cold water is available. I could have found a basic hotel at this price. I sit in my room, eating dry stale bread and a peach for my evening meal, then spend the rest of the evening studying my map and writing my diary.

Another gloomy and windy morning. I get up, feeling groggy and leave at eight, having eaten nothing. Miraculously the wind is blowing in the opposite direction today. Back on the main road, I make good progress and soon arrive in Montélimar, where I search for a bank. I find one, but I am kept waiting and then told that I must go to another one. Fortunately I find one nearby and change IR £50. As the rate is good today, I get 470 francs. I make for the nearest *boulangerie*, where I buy bread and then a generous slice of pâté in a nearby butcher's shop. I find a table in a square and, standing up, eat a hasty breakfast. Then, espying apples in a nearby grocery shop, I select a couple, join a long queue and finally pay for them.

With food in my stomach and money in my pocket, I leave and continue my journey southwards. By now the clouds have disappeared and the sun shines brightly. I leave the main road and take a quieter one for Châteauneuf-du-Rhône. Approaching the hills, I see the ruins of an old castle perched perilously on the edge of some bare rocks. The hills that face the river, which rise up sheer from the water's edge, are very dramatic. From here I take a narrow country lane to Donzère, which passes over the

hills. Fortunately they are not steep at this point. At the top I encounter some Germans picking blackberries.

From the village of Donzère I take another quiet road that crosses the *autoroute* and head southwards in a straight line towards Bollène. Here the scenery is flat and fairly uninteresting: the only things to break the skyline are two huge factory chimneys belching white smoke heavenwards. I whizz through Bollène, which is a large modern town. Taking a country road, I continue southwards and turn on to a main road bound for Orange. I approach Mornas, which lies at the bottom of high, spectacular cliffs, cycle through the village and on to Piolenc, where I decide to stop at a cheap restaurant for an early lunch. The meal finishes with *flan*: a small bowl of caramel custard with caramel juice lurking underneath.

I leave at one and continue to the town of Orange, where I stop to admire the triumphal arch, which is not in good repair, to peep at the Roman theatre (also spoiled by the addition of modern fittings and not worth 10 francs to visit), to see the cathedral (which is locked) and to buy another Michelin map of the area between Aix-en-Provence and the Italian border. As there seems to be little else to see in this otherwise famous town, I leave and take the road to Carpentras, which means travelling south-eastwards.

On this main road I discover that the hedges are full of blackberries, and so I stop to stuff myself with some of them. The land here is flat and bland, though I can discern mountains in the distance. I turn off the main road at Sarrians for quiet country roads that bring me through the villages of Montoux and Velleron to my destination, which is Fontaine-de-Vaucluse, where there is a mountain resort and youth hostel.

Approaching the craggy mountains, I pass fields, orchards, vineyards and tall cyprus trees, and finally arrive at the village, which I find teeming with tourists. I stop at a grocery shop where I buy cheese, a tomato and two peaches, and I am given directions to the youth hostel. I am pleased to discover that the hostel is farther up the mountainside and well away from the crowds. I finally come to a stop at a courtyard where I find tables and chairs, and wait with some other young people until a girl appears with a key and opens the hostel, half an hour late. I am shown to a bed in a small dormitory.

After washing some clothes and taking a shower, I go outside for my simple supper, which consists of the food that I have just bought. I chat with a young French teacher from Paris and afterwards set about bringing my diary up to date while the other people cook large meals, eat and play *pétanque* afterwards. A large group of French people, including a black girl with a husky voice, spend the whole evening eating – I quickly lose track of how many courses they demolish. Despite the noise and excitement, I can hear an endless singing of crickets, grasshoppers and cicadas.

The sound increases in volume when I leave to take a short walk up the mountain and watch the bare rocks glow orange and then pink in the light of the setting sun. Here the rock surfaces are uneven and pitted with holes and caves. By the time I return and take in my washing, now as dry as a bone, stars are twinkling in the clear night sky.

Weary of listening to nearly everybody snoring in the dormitory, I rise before seven, wash, eat a hasty breakfast and leave at half past eight. At this hour of the morning it is delightfully fresh outside and the sun shines from a clear blue sky. I freewheel downhill and, taking the same country road on which I had travelled yesterday, I make my way towards the main road to Avignon – a city that I am intent

on visiting. The scenery along the road is lush and pleasant. I see ripe pears hanging from trees but I refrain from picking them because of the number of people out and about. Fortunately the road is flat, except for one spectacular range of low hills. When I reach the top and look down, the Rhône valley appears before me. However, the view is ruined by the presence of ugly industrial buildings.

I soon arrive in Avignon and cycle through a gateway in the ancient ramparts at ten o'clock. As I wander through narrow old streets lined with shops in search of a tourist office, I realize that the city is nice and warrants a good visit. After walking aimlessly for a while, I am directed to the rue de la République, but I lose my way. A lady puts me right and I finally find the *Office de Tourisme*, where I buy a brochure for 3 francs, am given a map and a list of hotels. As I discover that there is a cheap hotel just a few streets away, I go to it immediately but find nobody on duty. I wait for a while and, just as I am about to leave, a lady appears. She offers me a double room with all mod cons for 50 francs and I accept. Leaving my bicycle in the cellar, I bring my luggage upstairs, wash my shorts and leave to do some sightseeing.



Palais des Papes, Place du Palais, Avignon

Free now of my bicycle and baggage, I study my brochure and head straight for the famous Palais des Papes or Popes' Palace, situated in the wide Place du Palais. This palace is recognized as one of the most important medieval Gothic buildings in Europe. Used both as a fortress and palace, it was the seat of Western Christianity during the fourteenth century. Pope Clement V moved the Papal Curia here during the early 1300s because of violent upheavals in Rome, and a proper reconstruction of an old Bishops' Palace was begun by Pope Benedict XII some thirty years later. The palace was built in two phases, with two distinct segments, known as the *Palais Vieux* (Old Palace) and the *Palais Neuf* (New Palace). Six papal conclaves were held here during the 1300s, before the papacy finally returned to Rome.

I approach the huge, imposing stone structure, pay 15 francs for a ticket and enter. I am disappointed to discover that the place looks like a barracks inside: I wander through a succession of huge, stark rooms with virtually nothing in them save for a few paintings and tapestries. However, there are a couple of small chapels with faded frescoes, the decorated walls and ceiling of the Pope's bedroom, the Chamber of the Deer and the Great Chapel, but apart from these there is little else. I feel that the whole place (which had been used as a barracks from the 1790s to 1906) is a tourist rip-off, but at least I am satisfied that I have seen it at long last. To me it seems that

the ancient Abbey of Cluny and this palace are, as Doctor Samuel Johnson once said, 'Worth seeing but not worth going to see'.



Hôtel de Ville, Place de l'Horloge

Afterwards, I make my way to the Place de l'Horloge, sit down at a table outside one of the many restaurants facing the Hôtel de Ville and its interesting clock tower, and order a good meal for 31 francs. It is pleasant to linger here in the shade, eat, drink, and watch the world go by.

Later I stroll back to the Palace and pay a visit to the Cathédral Notre-Dame des Doms. It is dark and cool inside, and not quite as splendid as the brochure makes it out to be. After taking a good look around, I leave, cross the boiling hot square and visit the Petit Palais as a means of escaping from the heat. The ten-franc ticket admits me to rooms full of obscure Italian religious paintings from the middle ages to the Renaissance. I spend about an hour or so wandering from one room to another, but soon weary of looking at so many paintings of a similar genre.

Back outside in the heat, I decide to visit the Calvet museum before it closes at five o'clock. Although the Hôtel Calvet has a pleasant courtyard and a garden containing pheasants, it proves to be something of a disappointment. The building is just a shadow of what was once a very elegant home, and the few rooms left in their original state are shabby: there are holes in the walls, the paint is flaking off them and there are cracks in the ceilings. In one of these rooms a bird, which has flown in through an open window, waddles along the floor. The small museum contains a large collection of keys and locks, some small safes with intricate locks, a few clocks and watches, some examples of Greek stone carving and pottery, and a large collection of obscure and rather dark paintings. Nevertheless, I find a couple of humorous Breughel pictures and a few interesting turn-of-the-century works. Many of the larger works are by Claude-Joseph Vernet.

The best part of this museum is saved until last: an exhibition of cartoons and numerous drawings, many of which send me into fits of giggles. Most of them are

drawn by eminent French artists, but there are some by the English satirical cartoonist Ronald Searle, whose witty drawings are reproduced in a book that we have at home.

I leave just before the museum closes, buy a few groceries and bring them back to the hotel. Now that it has started to cool down, I go walking around the town centre. I make my way northwards to the ramparts and stop at the famous bridge of Saint Bénézet, which I stop to photograph. If I pay 5 francs I can claim to have been *Sur le Pont d'Avignon*, but I resist the temptation as I can see it very well from where I am. Paying just to stand on a famous bridge is preposterous, I think.



The bridge of Saint Bénézet, Avignon

I then climb the Rocher des Doms, with its gardens, to enjoy a spectacular view of the Rhône, the old bridge and, in the distance, the Fort Saint-André of Villeneuve. Descending from the other side, I amble through old narrow streets, admiring the houses (many of which have statues of the Virgin and Child on the walls) and looking for various churches. Most of these are either locked, converted into houses, warehouses or, in one case, into a cinema. I notice a hippy gazing out of an upper window in a church façade. In another part of the old quarter, many of the buildings are converted into shops. I walk through interesting little squares and complete my perambulations by returning to the rue de la République and sitting down in a little park to admire another old church and listen to a couple of hikers practising music on recorders. Certainly the city centre is full of character and has a pleasant atmosphere, but I feel as though I have seen everything that I want to see in it by now. No doubt there are other places of interest, but I will be happy to leave tomorrow.

Still with time to kill, I ramble back towards the Place de l'Horloge, where street musicians are entertaining the people, and sit down in the Place du Palais to relax and gaze at the palace and cathedral. Just around the corner, a recorder trio perform to earn a few francs. I can hear folk music wafting from the other square, and nearby somebody is playing an electric guitar. As dusk slowly envelops the city, lights come on to illuminate the old buildings. I listen to some Italians conversing and later I chat to two young Irish ladies who are travelling around Europe using Interrail passes. They are on their way home this evening. Both are school teachers and one of them is interested in music; she is trying to learn the flute but has been advised to take up the recorder. Coincidentally, the recorder trio moves into this square, strikes up and is awarded with a round of applause by the onlookers.

I finally make my way back to my hotel with the two young ladies; we exchange addresses and say goodbye. Up in my room I write my diary until bedtime. It has been another pleasant and interesting day.