

9: From Avignon to Arles

Back on the bike. I set off early, cross the Rhône by the old bridge and head a little northwards to Villeneuve-les-Avignon in order to look at Fort Saint-André and its tower, but neither is particularly impressive. I had seen them yesterday from the Rocher des Doms and they had looked interesting. Distance lends enchantment!

Checking my map before heading south-westwards to Nîmes, I notice a village between here and Orange named Châteauneuf-du-Pape – a familiar name to many.

I now turn back and begin my day's journey; fortunately the weather is sunny and fresh. I can go to Nîmes via the famous Pont du Gard, but that entails travelling over hills and along a main road. Instead, I follow the Rhône on a quiet country road and head towards the village of Aramon, skirting the hills and their exposed rocky cliff faces. After Aramon comes another village, Montfrin; en route I stop to pick blackberries and help myself to some apples and pears that have fallen from trees in an orchard. Here the hills begin to disappear and vineyards come into view.

I now cycle along a short stretch of a main road, turn off on to another country road and head for the village of Meynes. I then cross over a low range of hills and pass more vineyards as I drop southwards and approach Redessan. From here I join the main road and travel westwards towards Nîmes, which I reach at midday – just as it is becoming hot.

I head straight for the *Office du Tourisme*, where I obtain a brochure and a map of the town. In the office I meet a lady whom I have seen at breakfast in Avignon this morning. Consulting my new map, I make my way to a cheap restaurant in a quiet pedestrianized street, but I end up in a more sophisticated establishment that offers an excellent meal for just 27 francs: salad, a large shell full of *fruits de mer* (assorted seafood) with *pommes frites*, and ice cream.



The *Maison Carrée* in Nîmes

Afterwards, I sit on stone steps and eat my delicious blackberries while admiring the famous Roman temple known as the Maison Carrée or 'square house' – one of the best preserved temples in the former Roman Empire. Built between 20–12 BC, it

once dominated the ancient forum of Nîmes. Its architecture and decoration were inspired by the temples of Apollo and Mars Ultor in Rome. It was later dedicated to Caius and Lucius Caesar, the heirs of Emperor Augustus. It has six Corinthian columns at the front and back, and eleven on each side. At the front, fifteen steps lead to the vestibule. This handsome building has undergone extensive restoration over the centuries; at one time it formed part of a larger complex of adjoining buildings that were subsequently demolished. It is now in fairly good condition.



The Roman Arena in Nîmes

Satisfied that I have at last seen this notable temple, which has long been on my 'must see' list, I walk off in search of the Musée des Beaux Arts. En route I stop to admire another wonder from the Roman Empire: the magnificent Arena built in around AD 70, shortly after the Colosseum in Rome. Again, like the Maison Carrée, it is one of the best-preserved Roman amphitheatres in existence. I am happy to admire this great oval building from outside as by now it has become too hot for clambering up and down stone steps.

The museum is just one street away and I escape into its cool and fine classical interior. I am surprised that admission is free, but I soon discover why: many of the rooms are closed to the public. In this former *hôtel* I wander around, looking at collections of classical and modern paintings. In a particularly large *salon* I find a magnificent Roman mosaic floor. I take in as much as I can, though the heat and my meal are both making me drowsy by now.

Outside again, I push the bike back up to the Arena, past the Palais de Justice and to the Archaeological Museum, stopping on the way at the old Bibliothèque for a quick look at a free exhibition of not particularly good contemporary paintings. I discover that admission to the Archaeological Museum is also free: just as well, for there is little of interest to see. I stop to look at some Roman artefacts, Neolithic flints and stones, Greek pottery, and then some Roman coins and statuettes. As the section on natural history does not appeal to me, I leave and wander up the street to have a look at the rather uninteresting remains of the Porte Auguste, a Roman gateway, and the Neo-Gothic church of Saint Baudile nearby, which, although plain, is impressive. Its fine façade features two tall spires.

Next, I cycle along the busy but attractively tree-lined Boulevard Gambetta, turn off to photograph the Maison Carrée, then, skirting an elegant canal known, rather curiously, as the Quai de la Fontaine, I arrive at the classical Jardins de la Fontaine,

designed in the eighteenth century by the military engineer J. P. Mareschal. These gardens are quite magnificent. During the Roman Empire, this was a site of the baths, theatre and Temple of Diana, the ruins of which I stop to examine.

From here I finally make my way up a steep hill to the youth hostel, which will open at six o'clock, in fifteen minutes' time. I spend the intervening time chatting with three girls, two from Bavaria and one from Belfast. Once I am ensconced in the hostel, I jump back on the bicycle, this time without my luggage, and freewheel down to the town. I lock my bike to the railings of the gardens and go off in search of the Roman baths and the Magne tower; I find them and conclude that they are not worth going out of one's way to see. Once again, Doctor Johnson's phrase comes to mind. I return to the main part of the gardens, where I sit on a bench near the fountains and relax. By now, the warmth and almost exotic atmosphere of the south is slowly beginning to soak into my consciousness; I have already noticed how more easy-going and friendly the people appear to be in this region, and I attribute this, rightly or wrongly, to the balmy conditions, bright sunshine and, perhaps, the influence of nearby Spain and Italy.

Rested and in good form, I return to the hostel to eat a simple supper. Again I chat to the girl from Belfast and a young lady from Birmingham. While writing my diary later, I hear young cyclists like myself swapping notes on how many kilometres they have been travelling each day. From what they are saying, it seems that they have been bombing along main roads, going from one place to another and seeing nothing. Although I must have clocked up quite an impressive amount of miles and kilometres so far, I have no inclination to divulge such statistics to anybody. The purpose of my journey is to visit all the interesting places that I have long wanted to see, and cycling at a pace that enables me to stop now and then in order to soak up all that is to be observed, tasted and experienced.

This morning the weather is bright and clear. I am up before anyone else and treat myself to a welcome shower. I sit down with the girl from Belfast to eat the hostel breakfast: a bowl of coffee (or is it cocoa?) with a hard-boiled egg, bread, butter and apricot jam. I leave at about nine o'clock and freewheel down to the town centre, where I spend about an hour happily wandering around the narrow streets in the old quarter. It is delightfully fresh at this hour of the morning, and few people are about, even though it is a Friday.

Satisfied that I have seen everything of interest by now, I leave and take the main road to Saint-Gilles, but finding the road too busy, I turn off on to a quieter country road, even though it is taking me a little bit out of my way. Passing vineyards, I make my way to the village of Aubord, but turn off for G  n  rac. From here I cycle to Saint-Gilles along a pleasant road at a nice, easy pace. Just before I reach the town, I cross over the Canal du Bas Rh  ne Languedoc. The last word interests me: although Languedoc is the name of a former province in this region, the words *langue d'oc* ('language of yes') refer to one of the two principal groups of medieval French dialects that was spoken south of a line running roughly between Bordeaux and Grenoble. This *langue d'oc* developed into Occitan, and included Proven  al, a dialect once used by the troubadours in the south of France. The other medieval dialect group was *langue d'o  l* (also meaning 'language of yes'), which was prevalent in central and northern France. Within this group, the Paris dialect supplanted all the others and eventually developed into modern French. As everyone knows, the modern French word for 'yes' is *oui*.

I arrive in Saint-Gilles by about 11.30 a.m. and stop to take a look at the fine old abbey church, which, according to legend, was founded in the seventh century by the saint, who became one of the most venerated figures in the area. During the eleventh century, the monastery was attached to Cluny. While ambling around the narrow streets of the old quarter, one of my sandals breaks and I unceremoniously throw the old pair into the nearest bin.

Shortly after midday I repair to the welcome shade of a hotel restaurant, where I eat an indifferent lunch and chat to a couple of men from the locality.

Smothered in suncream, I set off again at two o'clock and make my way southwards to the Camargue region, famous for its white horses, cattle, wetlands and marshes. This area, which I have read about and am interested to see, forms western Europe's largest river delta: that of the Rhône (which splits into two before it meets the sea). This vast plain contains brine lagoons or *étangs*, which are cut off from the sea by sandbars and encircled by reed-covered marshes. Home to more than four hundred species of birds, these *étangs* provide one of the few habitats for the greater flamingo. The native horses or *Carmarguais* that roam the marshlands and are ridden by *gardians* or cowboys, are regarded as being one of the most ancient breeds in the world. Another form of life famous in the region are the particularly vicious mosquitoes, which I very much hope I do not encounter. Also, after my experience in Biddesden, I have no ambition to sample the delights of horseriding in the area.

In order to avoid the main roads, I take a slightly longer route and, because of the heat and strong wind, I cycle at an unhurried pace. However, having read impressive descriptions of this well-known and important region, I am not particularly enchanted by what I now can see: a flat, monotonous landscape containing large fields of tomatoes, marshes with birds flying overhead, reeds blowing in the wind, and a few horses in the distance. An occasional clump of trees breaks the skyline, and here and there I encounter a single burnt tree trunk.

Approaching the Mediterranean and the town of Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer along a minor road, I pass the Étang de Vaccarès (but see nothing of it), and then a string of guesthouses and hotels offering horse rides. At last I reach the town, exhausted after fighting against the wind. As it is a tourist trap, full of modern houses and hotels, I wonder why the hell I've come here. When I discover that the youth hostel is about ten kilometres on the way back to Arles, I become really annoyed, especially when I discover that I must have passed it without realizing it. I have no option but to backtrack. I quickly purchase some bread, pâté and tomatoes, and leave by the main road, where the wind blows stronger than before.



The Camargue

I finally reach the rather primitive and scruffy hostel at around 6 o'clock, where I am obliged to hire a sheet and am shown around the place by a bearded warden. Glad to have a roof over my head, I spruce myself up, wash some clothes, eat a simple meal and sit down to write my diary, despite the noise of the energetic young people here.

When I have finished writing, I stroll outside to see a dramatic sunset. By now it has turned quite cold and the wind is still blowing. Just over the horizon to the west, a patch of sky beneath a great bank of heavy black clouds has turned bright orange, and the edges of the clouds glow. At last a touch of magic has transformed this bleak, wild landscape into something more acceptable. In a field beside the hostel some frisky horses gather around a covered pen, their manes blowing in the wind. I take a few photos, return to the hostel and from there watch flashes of bright lightning crash from the dark clouds down towards the sea.

A girl who has been sitting outside now asks me, in French, what nationality I am. When I reply, '*Irlandais*', her face lights up and she exclaims in English, 'I'm Irish too!' We spend the rest of the evening together, chatting. She tells me that she has been living in Paris for a couple of years, where she has been working and learning French. Her friend, an English girl, is on holidays with her and they are both hitch-hiking. During the evening, the English girl receives a telephone call from home and learns that she has passed her final examinations with flying colours. Quaking with emotion, she fetches a half bottle of wine and shares it with us in order to celebrate.

I finally retire to bed, feeling quite tired, at about eleven o'clock. The warden is in a foul mood because somebody has left crockery unwashed.

This morning I am up before anyone else and am eating my improvised breakfast when the warden, still cursing the unwashed crockery, appears and starts to prepare the hostellers' breakfast. When I am ready to leave, I am given the task of sweeping the *terrasse*. I then bid the Irish and English girls farewell and hit the road at nine o'clock. To be more precise, the wind hits me as it blows in my face again.

This morning I am bound north-eastwards for Arles, a town I have long wanted to visit. Many years ago, when I was a boy, I was given a present of a book about art, and in it was a colour reproduction of a painting, done in bright colours, by Vincent van Gogh, of his little bedroom in Arles. Many a time did I gaze at this simple, almost childish depiction of a cosy bedroom with its simple wooden furniture and lopsided perspective; I expect that my fascination with this picture was due to its resemblance to an illustration in a children's book. Later in life, when I had eventually thrown aside pop music, I often listened with pleasure to a suite of incidental music composed by Georges Bizet for a play named *l'Arlésienne* ('The Girl from Arles') that had been written by Alphonse Daudet. In my imagination, the picture and the music became almost inseparable, and I pictured the town of Arles, where van Gogh had lived and worked, as a magical sunny place in Provence. I am now interested to see if it lives up to my high expectations.

Cycling to Arles is a tough job, even though the wind is now blowing from one side. Apart from this and the flying dust, it is a fine, bright and sunny morning. The monotonous, flat countryside continues. At one point I pass a field of dried-up crops that are on fire; the flames and billowing smoke are fanned by the wind. At last I reach Arles, at the top of the Carmargue, where the Rhône splits into two. Exhausted, I join the heavy traffic and crowds at the Saturday morning market. As I am running short of money, I head for the main square, where thankfully I find an open bank. I change another £50, amble around and ask directions for the *Syndicat d'Initiative*. It is

not far away; I leave with a comprehensive brochure that includes a map, and I now set about finding my way to a cheap restaurant in one of the picturesque back streets. Here, as in some of the other towns I have passed through in this region, I see signs with street names written in the Provençal dialect, which looks a little like Catalan or Italian. Indeed, yesterday when I was in Saint-Gilles, I had seen notices written in what looked like Arabic script. Because of the gypsy influence in these parts, the presence of darker-skinned people and the tradition of bullfighting in some of the old Roman arenas, I am beginning to detect a certain intoxicating exotic element here, some of which may have come from Moorish Spain.



Arles

The restaurant that I have chosen serves an excellent Provençal meal for the very reasonable sum of 27 francs, with a small carafe of rosé wine included. I start with a *salade verte* (lettuce in olive oil), and this is followed by the main course: *pieds et paquets* (trotters and tripe) with *flageolets* (flageolet beans). Typically, fresh bread is served with these dishes and the meal finishes with a selection of grapes.

Feeling rather full and drowsy after the wine, I walk up the road to the old Roman Thermes de Constantin, turn a corner and approach the Musée Réattu, an art gallery situated in a seventeenth-century building. Here I buy a ticket for 17 francs that will admit me to nearly all the museums and sights in Arles. I find this to be a most interesting gallery; in it I see several sketches and paintings of Provençal scenery and the Camargue by Henri Rousseau. Then, having examined more French and some Flemish paintings, I stop to look at some paintings by Jacques Réattu, who was born in Arles in 1760. As I have never heard of this painter before, I am curious to see what type of work he has done. My impression is that he could paint very well indeed, but as he seems to have specialized in dramatic and very crowded religious and classical paintings, his work is rather overpowering. Also in the gallery are a couple of contemporary exhibitions; the second one consists of photographs taken by the followers of Alexey Brodovitch, a photographer born in Belarussia in 1898, and who died in France in 1971. These I find very interesting and varied. After these come a section devoted to the work of Pablo Picasso, who worked and died in France.

I happily spend two hours here and leave to see the Roman *thermes* or baths properly; I am fascinated to see how the central heating system had been constructed under the floors. Apart from this, there is little else to see. I then collect my bicycle and go walking around the warren of busy back streets, where I see many old and charming buildings. By now I have decided that I like this place – the atmosphere is pleasant and there seems to be plenty to see.

Next, I find my way to the old Roman Arena and stop to photograph it. I do not dare go into it, as there is no place where I can leave my bicycle and as there are a number of rather sleazy-looking characters hanging around. I also encounter several tall African youths trying to sell hats, leather bags, belts and beads – a familiar sight in these parts. I have noticed these Africans before in public squares or bothering customers at restaurants.

As it is now about five o'clock, I return to the Place de la République (the main square) with its fine buildings, and in the *Syndicat d'Initiative* I rummage through brochures to see if there are any concerts or events on this evening. When I am satisfied that there will be nothing on of interest today, I leave in order to find the youth hostel that the Irish girl had told me about yesterday evening. On the way I stop in a supermarket to buy a couple of provisions, and there I hear the unfamiliar guttural sounds of the Provençal dialect. The locals also speak standard French, but in their own manner; *pain* for instance (the word for 'bread') does not have the usual nasal ending, but is pronounced *peng*. The letter R is not guttural here, but is rolled as in Spanish and Italian.

Although the hostel is poorly signposted, I eventually find it without too much trouble. It is in a pleasantly quiet suburb and it is run by a different organization. At 36 francs, it is more expensive than most others, but it is very clean and well run, with individual lockers for everyone. However, as there is no kitchen, I eat my simple evening meal in the little dormitory. After chatting with a German and two Italian lads, I go out for a walk. However, as it is so cold, and as I am still dressed in my shirt and shorts, I am forced to return after a short time. The town seems to be as dead as a doornail – there is no night-time music making as there has been in Avignon. On returning to the hostel, I notice that small black objects have fallen from the trees. I pick one up and discover that it is an olive. It is obvious that I am close to the Mediterranean now.

Back in the hostel, I sit down in the rather noisy communal room-cum-bar in order to write my diary, and later repair to bed.

I am up at seven this Sunday morning to take a hot shower and wash some clothes. I then join the lads from my dormitory (a German, some Italians and a Parisian) for a typically French – and therefore inadequate – breakfast of coffee, bread, butter and jam. Afterwards I pay for another night, then set off on foot for the town centre at nine o'clock. Although the sun shines from a clear blue sky, it is refreshingly cool and slightly breezy. I avoid the shade of the trees and deliberately walk in the sunshine. At this hour of the morning, few people are out and about.

Just up the road I turn into the Alyscamps, a large Roman necropolis just outside the walls of the old town. The name, I discover, is derived from the Provençal Occitan word *Aliscamps*, which comes from the Latin *Elisii Campi* – Elysian Fields in English and *Champs-Élysées* in modern French. According to the Roman custom, people were buried outside cities, and so this burial ground was Arles' main cemetery for nearly 1,500 years. Cemeteries are generally rather grim places to visit, but this one is particularly beautiful, with its avenues lined with poplars and elegant stone sarcophagi. I follow one of these avenues to the medieval church of Saint Honoratus, which I discover is currently undergoing restoration.

During the previous year, in 1981, the cemetery had been classified as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Van Gogh painted two atmospheric autumnal views of this peaceful spot in 1888 and entitled the two 'pendants', as he called them, *Les Alyscamps*. As I amble around, I stop to inhale an intoxicating perfume from one of the

shrubs. Near the church I find an elderly man sketching the scene before him. In one of the tombs I find a Michelin guide to Provence, which I flick through and read short passages, but as I find a museum ticket inside, I hand it to the lady at the gate when I leave.



The Roman Arena, Arles

Enjoying the fresh morning air and no longer in a hurry, I now walk to the remains of the former twelfth-century church of Saint-Blaise by the old Roman ramparts, and, ambling through the fascinating old narrow streets, now looking so picturesque in the bright morning light, I reach the remarkable Roman Arena that I had admired yesterday. I now visit it using my ticket. As there are so few people about, I spend some time inside clambering up to the top to enjoy good views both of the Arena and the town, and going underground to observe the structure of the building. I notice that the arena is fitted out for regular bullfights.

Using my ticket again, I then visit the impressive Augustan Roman Theatre, which is just a stone's throw away. It was built in the late first century BC – predating the Arena by about one hundred years. The theatre, which had once been beautifully decorated, was used for stage productions that had included mimes, pantomimes, tragedies and comedies. As the performances were heavily laden with political propaganda, admission was free. Despite the fact that the theatre was used as a quarry after the fall of the Roman Empire, it is now in remarkably fine condition – despite the fact that only two columns of the backdrop now survive. The marble floor of the semi-circular *orchestra* (the front part of the stage) is still to be seen, but in the grounds surrounding the theatre I find fragments of marble capitals and columns, carved lintels and so forth. Judging by the modern fittings, such as seats and spotlights (which look so much out of place), the theatre is still used regularly for entertainment.

As it is eleven o'clock by now, I decide that I had better visit a museum before lunch while I am still fresh and there are so few people about. I walk to the main square, the Place de la République, and enter the Pagan Art Museum, where I spend a pleasant hour admiring the quite fresh-looking Roman mosaics, statues, tombstones and sarcophagi, many of which are in excellent condition. In the museum I meet a German girl from the youth hostel who has seen everything by now and has run out of things to do. As it is coming up to lunchtime, we decide that we will eat together.

When I have finished my tour of the museum, we meet in the square and, chatting in French (which the girl speaks fluently), we walk to a reasonably-priced restaurant,

where I eat a very indifferent ‘Provençal’ meal, which I suspect must have been concocted for tourists. We linger over our lunches, lost in agreeable conversation, pay, and leave about an hour later.

After we have said goodbye, I wander off to visit the ethnographic Museon Arlaten (as the Provençal speakers call the Arles Museum) housed in an old *hôtel*. This turns out to be an badly illuminated jumble of traditional costumes, materials, furniture (including salt boxes and unusual openwork bread cupboards), wax manikins dressed in Provençal clothing within traditional settings, collections of dreadful nineteenth-century pictures and drawings, gaudy religious art and statuary, collections of books, poems, ballads, musical instruments (mostly fifes and tabors), and a section devoted to the pioneer of the Provençal revival, Frédéric Mistral.

Although it is interesting and gives me some idea of the traditions and costumes of the region, I am not sorry to leave and go off in search of something a little more to my liking. At the back of the building I find the fine old eighteenth-century Jesuit church in which is housed the Museum of Christian Art. Here I admire the large and magnificent wooden altarpiece – quite a breathtaking sight – and the large collection of early Christian sarcophagi dating from the late Roman period. I speak briefly to an English couple who are enthralled by everything on show, as am I.

From here I return to the Place de la République, stopping briefly to look at an exhibition of crude contemporary paintings of various places in the region and then another one of modern art, which I quite dislike, in the Hôtel de Ville. However, some watercolours of the Camargue region are very much to my liking.

I then cross the square to visit the Romanesque Church of Saint Trophime, which has an interesting but rather weathered twelfth-century façade but little or nothing inside, as it has been visibly altered and modernized. The cloisters next door, however, are really charming and full of atmosphere. Constructed between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries, they are reckoned to be one of the most beautiful examples in France; I certainly agree. I linger here, resting and gazing around this peaceful little corner of the city, admiring the sculpture on the capitals of the columns. Off the cloisters are rooms containing exhibitions: one of old tapestries, another of the remains of a tiny Romanesque church in the region and, finally, work by the Japanese conceptual artist Keiji Uematsu, which includes photographs and delicate constructions of wood and stone.



The Cloisters of Saint Trophime, Arles

After a leisurely look around, I leave and head for a nearby photographic exhibition, but find that it is now closed. Instead, I devote my remaining energy to finding some food for a snack. After wandering rather aimlessly around the back streets, I end up buying nothing more than a couple of tasteless *brioches*, a can of beer and a peach. I sit down for my improvised meal on a low wall behind the Musée Réattu, overlooking the River Rhône. The fresh wind that has been gently blowing has stopped by now and it is quite warm, even though it is seven o'clock in the evening.

Afterwards I return to the grocery shop to buy cheese and an apple, then retrace my steps to the now familiar Place de la République, where I sit for a while doing nothing but soaking up the wonderful atmosphere. I have enjoyed Arles; even though I have seen just about everything of interest, I will be sorry to leave.

Finally, at eight o'clock, I walk back to the youth hostel and, sitting in the dining room where a record player is playing music at full blast, I write my diary. Tomorrow morning I will be off again on my bike.