



Unearthing the Treasures of Aix-en-Provence

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Magnetic Aix-en-Provence is one of the wealthier cities in France, with a long history of civilization and a roster of distinguished inhabitants. However, a visit to the city of art and water can be a challenge for discerning travelers, where selective addresses need to be coaxed out from under her scruffy layers.

A Roman community established in 122 BC was named *Aquae Sextiae*, the waters of Sextius, a tribute to the highly respected consul Sextius Calvinus. Aix was strategically located with access to natural water sources, including *les Etuves* and *les Bagniers*, which supplied warm water for the Roman thermal baths. The remains of these ancient pools can be seen today at the site of a modern, luxurious spa, the *Thermes Sextius*.

Thermes Sextius is roughly 34,444 square feet (3,200 square meters) of pure indulgence. The spa offers a full array of treatments in a temple of cooling limestone and marble. Inviting crystal-blue pools and cascading water calm the senses. The soothing springs heal the body just as they did in

Roman times.

Countless fountains were built in Aix, to meet both domestic demands and requirements for animal husbandry. Perhaps the most iconic fountain is the immense *la Rotonde*, with its pool 105 feet (32 meters) in diameter, commanding the heart of a central roundabout. It is adorned with beautifully crafted, white marble figures depicting the historical affiliation with neighboring cities of Marseille and Avignon.

Aix has long been a thriving community – a natural trading center located between Italy and Spain – and the city evolved as a cultural capital. Inspired by the Provençal climate and pleasant surroundings, famous names such as Cézanne, Picasso, Zola, Mistral and Hemingway frequented the cafés. Visitors interested in art and antiques can arrange private tours with Rebecca Engels (www.rebeccaaix.com) who makes a practice of sourcing exclusive, quality products for the home.



Provence is a paradise for food lovers and market aficionados and, in that regard, Aix is exceptional. Jennifer Dugdale, the creative mind behind Tastes of Provence (www.tastesofprovence.com), provides exclusive tours of the historical sights in Aix, expertly paired with a sampling of market fare and some of her favorite foodie locations.

Wondering around the old streets and shopping should work up an appetite for gourmet creations; luckily Aix has two Michelin-rated restaurants. Restaurant Pierre Reboul, tucked away at 11, Petite Rue St Jean, has a contemporary feel – designed with a sleek, dark-gray floor and a vaulted, white stone envelope. Alcoves play with light, shadows and color to match the inspired cuisine of this master chef. Restaurant diners are invited to sample his tasting menus: *Les Experts* or *Les Amateurs*.

A short walk from the Cathédrale St-Sauveur, at 10, avenue de la Violette, one finds the garden and kitchen of Chef Jean-Marc Banzo at Le Clos de la Violette. Enter the whitewashed doorway into a verdant garden. The restaurant décor is a statement in classic elegance with chocolate tones complementing subtle vanillas. The chef's talent is reflected in the originality of his dishes as he plays with duck, foie gras, fresh fish and other Mediterranean ingredients.

Once unearthed, the treasures of Aix are almost guaranteed to bring you back for more in the future. ■



There are two superb hotels located in the core. The Villa Gallici, part of the renowned Relais & Châteaux label, was once a private residence. Converted into a hotel in 1991, the Villa sits on a 7.4-acre (three-hectare) property with 22 richly decorated guest rooms. Hotel clients are encouraged to feel at home in this sublime location steps away from the ancient fortified walls.

The decorative touches and manicured gardens are a captivating blend of Provence meets Italy. Hotel interiors strike an elegant tapestry in warm shades of yellow, splashes of red and punches of olives and blues, all chosen to mimic the natural, regional color palette. Guest rooms are decorated in luxurious linens and plush wall coverings. The thoughtful design of the hotel and gardens creates intimate corners for guests wishing to enjoy a quiet moment and a touch of privacy.

Described as a small Florentine Palace, Villa Gallici is also recognized for the gastronomic cuisine created by Master Chef Christophe Gavot. Guests are treated to a menu inspired by the seasons of Provence and influenced by products local to this Mediterranean region. In warmer months, meals are served on a terrace shaded by a large plane tree, overlooking the aqua pool and meticulous garden beds. In less favorable weather, guests are invited to relax in intimate candlelit spaces offering romantic seclusion.

The second hideaway is Hôtel le Pignonnet with 47 rooms located a quick drive from the historical center. This hotel was purpose-built in 1924 on a 2.4-acre (one-hectare) parcel. Le Pignonnet has been owned and operated by the same family for three generations. The rooms are tastefully

appointed using subtle Provençal fabrics and traditional patterns.

Plane trees contour the entranceway at this five-star hotel, creating a classical, leafy canopy. The gardens are a feast for the eyes; a metal trellis covered in red climbing roses shades a walkway, as a small fountain trickles gently on sand-colored stones – a cooling effect on a hot day.

These two properties are so divine that you might need encouragement to visit the old walled city and stylish Mazarin section. Do not miss the charm of the old cobbled streets, narrow alleys, towering church steeples and sunny squares filled with restaurant terraces; the scenes are intoxicating. Period buildings flank the tree-lined Cours Mirabeau, a wide boulevard that has been compared to the Champs-Élysées. This short stretch of road begins at *la Rotonde* and is punctuated by mossy fountains, a shaded backdrop for strollers and café loungers.

Shopping in Aix is abundant; however, quality products and luxury goods are limited to only a small section of the map. Running at two angles off Place St Honoré are Rue des Baginiers and Rue Marius Reinud, a compact area for shoppers searching for exclusive brands in fashion, accessories and jewelry.

