

View from Villeneuve: From Villeneuve across the Rhone River you get a splendid view of Avignon and the Papal Palace.



Provence: A TALE OF TWO CITIES

By MANNY GONZALEZ
Plantation Bay Resort & Spa



Part I: Avignon
In the popular imagination, Provence is sometimes equated with Tuscany — both are regions that don't really have a specific top-drawer tourist attraction (no Futbol Club de Barcelona, no red-light district with prostitutes in display windows), but where you can live in a converted farmhouse with 1930s plumbing, the food is good, and the countryside is scenic.

Vanishing Scenery. Well, the food may be good but let me tell you something about the scenic countryside of Provence and Tuscany. My theory is that on one day in spring, and another day in fall, conditions are just right, and photographers jet in from all over the world to take those pictures you see in postcards and travel magazines.

In between those two dates, the lavender flowers that stretch over the horizon, the waving amber fields of wheat — all have been sucked into some fourth dimension. Lured by the pictures, you the tourist come, only to hear the locals say, "Zut! The lavender seems to be late this year" or "Mi dispiace molto, the hills were a lovely yellow just last week, can't imagine why they're burnt brown now."

We'll leave Tuscany aside for a moment (I already have enough death threats outstanding against me), and focus on Provence. Do not come for the scenic countryside. There is hardly any. But there are still good reasons to come.

Veterans' Retirement Community. After Caesar conquered Gaul, the Romans discovered that some parts of it were better than others. For example, some mountains, though cold, were good for skiing (not that anyone had heard of skiing yet). Some coastlines, though rainy, were good for attacking England (not that England existed yet). And some parts, in the south, were sunny and good for goofing off — now this, many people had heard about.

Thus it was that the area we now call Provence (proh-VAHNS) was first chosen for colonization by Romans, most of them retired legionnaires who after a lifetime of pillaging and burning just wanted to settle down with a nice

French girl and grow grapes. (Today, some bankers, after a lifetime of figurative pillaging and burning, talk about retiring to Provence with their second wives. But it seems to be all talk.)

Since Rome fell, not much has happened in Provence. In the Middle Ages it was annexed by France, though no one much cared. In the late 1800s Vincent van Gogh and Paul Cezanne painted some pictures, but they didn't sell.

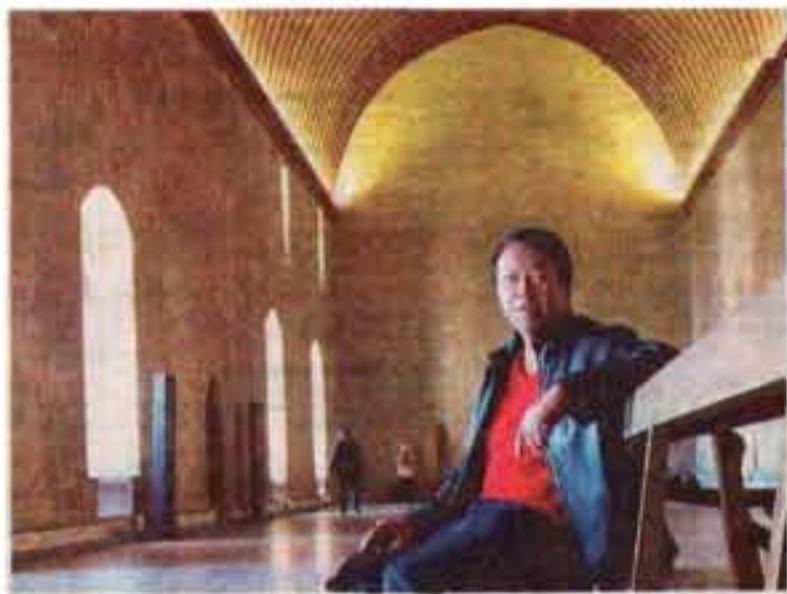
The Papal City of Avignon (ah-vin-YOHN). Well, okay, for about 70 years the popes lived here. As a devoted student of religious history, naturally the first thing you want to do in Avignon is see the Papal Palace. So I did.

It immediately became clear, though, that unlike the Vatican, the Papal Palace in Avignon is more or less emp-

ty (I guess when they went back to Rome the popes took all their stuff), and closely resembles a castle, which it was, since the Avignon popes were apparently paranoid types. Inside, the displays explain in mind-numbing detail how the popes wound up here, which pope built which tower, and why they went back to Rome.

If you don't want to spend all day reading fine print in French, you may walk through the Papal Palace as fast as you can, like I did. The downside was that although I sort of understand why the popes came (death threats in Rome, sunshine in Avignon), I haven't the foggiest notion why they left (the explanation was spread out over three big rooms). But I'll just have to live with that.

Squeaky-Clean City. This was the cleanest town I have ever seen, as if everything



Empty Interior: This was the main dining hall in the Papal Palace. When the popes left Avignon to go back to Rome, evidently they hired an energetic moving company.



Rhone: Once upon a time, the Kingdom of France was on the right bank of the Rhone (left in this picture), and the Kingdom of Provence on the left bank (right in this picture).



The author's hotel in Avignon was perfect. Almost.



Town Plaza: Avignon is the cleanest city the author has ever seen.

was scrubbed white every night, and it is as picturesque as towns in Southern France get. The medieval city walls are still intact. Avignon's town plaza has lots of restaurants and bars and a long central shopping street that runs all the way to the medieval gates.

The majestic Rhone River glides alongside the town proper, while across the

river is an equally pretty town called Villeneuve. Villeneuve (veel-NUV, "new city") is rather smaller than Avignon, but well worth a walk-through, precisely because it's across the river and from its higher elevations offers good views of the Papal Palace and the old city. There are various ruins but I most liked the abbey gardens (which most people appar-

ently skip, judging from the look of surprise on the attendant's face when I showed up with my four Euro admission). For once I had gotten my seasons right, and the gardens were delightful in early-spring bloom, the air heavy with the smell of flowering shrubs.

My hotel in Avignon was utterly charming (see picture), located in an old priory with lots of open space. The room was suitably spacious, and the Front Desk staff were good-looking and attentive. However, as my loyal readers know (in case there are any), there is almost always a fatal flaw, or some other good reason not to mention my hotel by name, and in this case the fatal flaw was Location (meaning, it was across the river in Villeneuve, not Avignon proper). This severely inhibited my ability to have afternoon siestas, so I cannot in good conscience recommend my hotel to you.

To be continued in *France* Aix-en-Provence (just say...)

Provence: A Tale of Two Cities

By Manny Gonzalez, Plantation Bay Resort & Spa

[suggested for publication in two parts]

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To be Continued in Part 2: Aix-en-Provence (just say EKS)