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Provence: A TALE OF TWO CITIES

By MANNY GONZALEZ
Plantation Bay Resort & Spa

Part 2: Aix-en-Provence
(just say EKS)

Town of Beautiful Women. Aix (eks) is the other major city in Provence. Now, I have always maintained that you can tell a lot about a city by the kind of establishment that predominates in its downtown. In Jackson, Wyoming, there are more art galleries than restaurants; this means that there are a lot of thin rich people there. In Hong Kong, there is a jewelry store every 10 meters; you can guess what this says about the men (I will not spell it out as I already have enough death threats, etc.).

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Maybe because it is a university town with students from all over the world (this is why the women outnumber men — lots more women get into college), maybe because those handsome Roman legionnaires picked the best Gauls to grow grapes with, and maybe because some of those cosmetics actually work, Aix has some serious talent, female-beauty-wise. It's all concentrated in the small Old Town district, where, if you sit at just the right place, you can fall in love with a different woman every two minutes.

Where is this "right place," you ask. Well, one edge of the Old Town is a wide boulevard called the Cours Mirabeau, and from there the old district extends northward about a kilometer. The Cours has a string of bars and restaurants that are always full, especially just when you are in need of dinner. However, this is not the "right place," because even though your café may be on a sidewalk, people pass by in a hurry.

Boulevard of Plane Trees and Pigeons. The Cours Mirabeau is one of the best-known streets in France, largely because it is planted on both sides with ancient London plane trees (not sure what the French call them, but they're the same tree that populate much of Hyde Park in London). These are very big, very leafy trees whose crowns



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have grown together, so that in summer you can walk down the middle of the boulevard in dense shade, though this might also get you hit by a car.

Unfortunately, I went in spring, before the leaves had come out. (See picture.) Just pretend these trees have leaves. Anyway, I am pretty sure there is a distinct downside to walking down the Cours in summer, and that downside is bird poop. Lots of birds. Lots of poop. Such was the evidence of the sidewalks below the trees, where, even though an entire winter had passed (snow and rain, etc.), one could still see layers of hardened bird-droppings everywhere.

Commerce and the Law. The best way I can describe the Old Town is that it looks like Diagon

Alley from the Harry Potter movies (though of course the architecture is Olde Frenche instead of Olde Englishe, it is the atmosphere that counts, and the atmosphere is about right). On top of that there are shops of every description, from Hermes to GAP. There are more shops here than in the downtown of Marseille, which has six times more people. During my four days in Aix, I spent quite a few hours just window-shopping and wandering around its picturesque cobweb of lanes.

Why so many shops? Well, here is my theory. France's Court of Appeals for much of the southern half of the country is located here. And where there are juries and judges, well... I will say no more because I hope to get my Schen-



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From the fountain, or for that matter any of the cafés around it, you can see up two or more of the lanes, giving you plenty of time to appreciate what is heading your way. And lots of good-looking women do head your way, though most of them are on a man's arms. Regardless, this is a great way to kill

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I took a break from stalking the waitress at Jo's to do the Camargue, and was gratified to see its famous herds of horses which are allowed to roam freely, but are so friendly that they come to any human who calls, and come faster if you wave a bag of stale bread, as my tour guide did.

The tour also took me to Ste. Marie de la Mer, which figures in *The Da Vinci Code* as the place where Mary Magdalene supposedly arrived after she fled Jerusalem. The church certainly looks 2,000 years old (see picture), and it felt really holy. The only place I have ever been to that felt as numinous (look it up) was Mont St. Michel. I am pinning special hope on the Three Wishes I made there.

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Provence: A Tale of Two Cities

By Manny Gonzalez, Plantation Bay Resort & Spa

[suggested for publication in two parts]

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CAPTIONS

Related to Part 1

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

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

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.

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

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).







Related to Part 2

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