

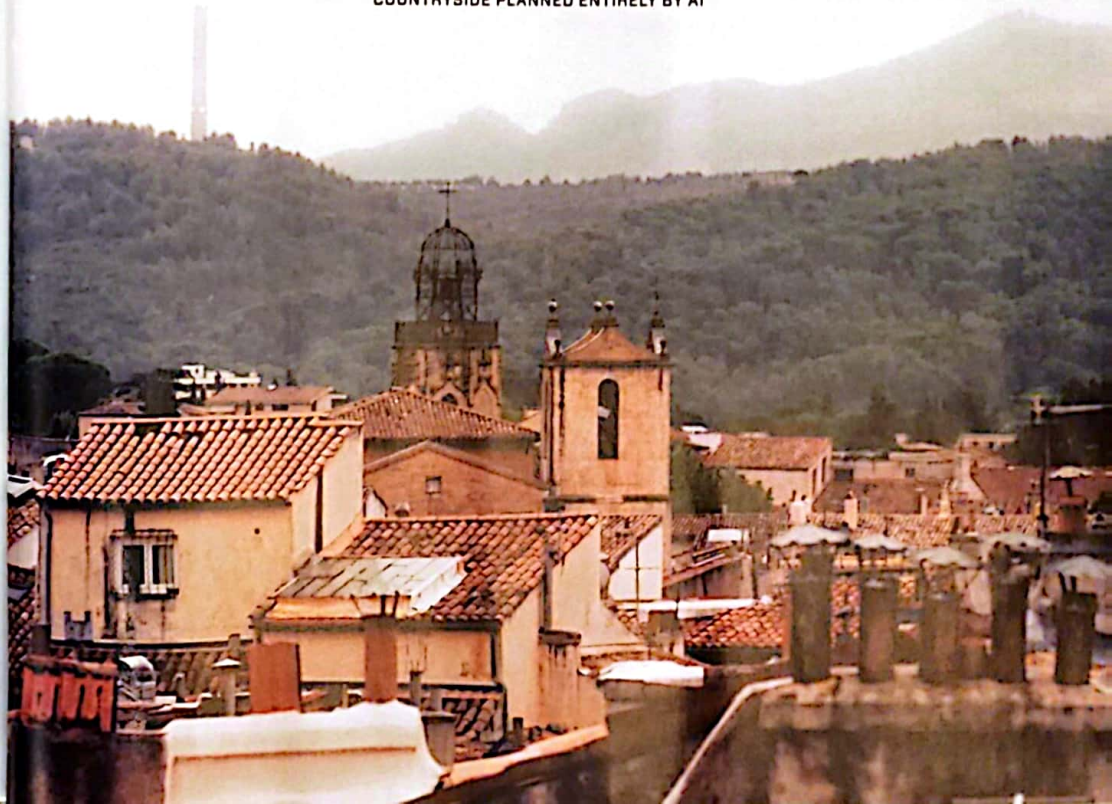


Once a fortress city, Aix-en-Provence's rooftops offer views of the nearby countryside and remnants of the Roman walls that used to surround it.

**LEFT** Aix-en-Provence, famed for its honey-coloured walls and pewter fixtures, is the perfect base for a Provençal escape.

## PROVENCE, POWERED BY CHATGPT

SOMETIMES, THE MOST DELIGHTFUL EXPERIENCES EMERGE WHEN WE LET GO OF EXPECTATIONS, AS JOURNALIST **SOPHIE BAKER** DISCOVERED ON A ROAD TRIP THROUGH THE FRENCH COUNTRYSIDE PLANNED ENTIRELY BY AI





**TOP** The food market at Place Richelme is where locals stock up on groceries for the week.

**ABOVE** Breakfast comes with a view of the old Roman wall at the Hôtel Aquabella & Spa.



**LEFT** Winding cobblestone streets add to the small-town charm.

It's said that most of the joy in travel lies in the planning, not the destination. Respectfully, I disagree. Gone are the days when I would pore over spreadsheets separating the pros and cons of every flight, train, hotel, suburb and restaurant in favour of a more relaxed approach to holiday plans.

So, I ditched traditional research methods and asked ChatGPT to plan the perfect road trip through Provence. If it worked, I reasoned, I'd save hours of planning. And we're told time is money, so, by extension, saving time would mean I'd have more euros to spend on swilling rosé wine around my glass or sampling a particularly pungent variety of Roquefort as I basked in the sunshine of the South of France.

What did I tell ChatGPT? I purposefully gave as little guidance as possible – only noting that I needed a mid-budget, five-day itinerary with hotels, restaurants and activity suggestions. I asked it to prioritise great food, typical Provençal experiences and picturesque scenery. I also specified that the itinerary had to start with a flight into Provence from London and then end somewhere that allowed me to take a train direct to Paris. After that, I hit enter, sat back and let my AI travel agent do all the work.

Would ChatGPT be the best road trip buddy I've ever had?

It suggested we fly into Nice to rent a car and begin our road trip, basing ourselves in two cities: Aix-en-Provence and Saint-Rémy-de-Provence. From these central locations, we'd be able to sip, savour and see the best the region offers, its sweeping coastal vistas, honey-coloured Roman streets, bustling fruit and veg markets and art exhibitions galore.

We planned to land in Nice in the afternoon and slowly drive through the Riviera into Aix-en-Provence. This was dashed after a last-minute cancellation of our flight. Instead, we arrived at midnight and had to navigate Provence's tiny roads by moonlight. The Hôtel Aquabella & Spa was our first stop. For this suggestion, I give ChatGPT a big thumbs up.

Despite arriving early in the morning, we were welcomed warmly and quickly shown to our room. Luckily, blackout curtains and a king-size bed were the perfect antidote to frustrating airport delays, and a night of decent shuteye meant I was ready to make up for lost time the following morning. Wandering down to breakfast, I caught my first proper glimpse of Aix-en-Provence and the extent of the Aquabella's charm. Taking a seat in a garden dotted with

quintessential Provençal lavender and overlooking the pool and its ancient Roman walls, I skipped straight over the hot breakfast in favour of freshly squeezed orange juice, a crusty baguette and a plate piled with soft French cheeses and charcuterie – finished off, naturally, with a pain au chocolat. This would be a recurring theme, as I found a way to incorporate cheese, pastry or bread into every meal.

The perfect place to get your first Camembert fix is La Fromagerie Passage – another ChatGPT highlight. Half cheese shop, half wine bar and restaurant, it's hidden in a narrow passageway off the Coeur Mirabeau in a building where Cézanne's father once owned a hat shop. Squeeze into the unassuming entrance, head up the stairs and dine on the rooftop under soft string lights, where you can order simple meals with fresh ingredients, cheese platters and a selection of wine by the glass.

It's hard to put into words how beautiful the old, golden town of Aix-en-Provence is. It's one of those rare small cities where everything is walkable, but you never feel suffocated or constrained by the narrow cobblestone streets or the small-town atmosphere. The shopping scene rivals Paris and Milan's, but without the loneliness that can come with bustling cities. Instead, locals browse for strawberries, rotisserie chickens and flowers at farmer's markets. Students whizz by on bicycles. People gather over a cappuccino and a croissant. Couples and friends spill into the streets from the assortment of bars and restaurants, sipping beers or coffee at all hours of the day, and there's always a lively chatter filling the air.

Despite the draw of calissons (sweets made with ground almonds) and madeleines (sponge finger cakes), the freshly baked baguettes, the sweet Provence peaches, and the seemingly endless choice of places to eat and drink, Provence is not only a haven for the gastronomically inclined. It is also a veritable muse for creatives, artists and art enthusiasts. I am artistically challenged and never managed to perfect even the simple stickman drawing, so when ChatGPT insisted I stop by the Carrières de Lumières in Les Baux, I was sceptical. My scepticism was quickly dispelled, however, by the extraordinary immersive display. An ancient stone quarry is transformed into an illuminated digital art gallery tens of metres high, complete with sound. The works of Vincent van Gogh, Piet Mondrian, and Johannes Vermeer dance across the walls of the quarry, *The Starry Night* giving way to *Wheatfields*.

**RIGHT** Carrières de Lumières is a feast for the senses, even for those who typically forego traditional art galleries.

**BELOW** Boats bob gently in the harbour town of Cassis.

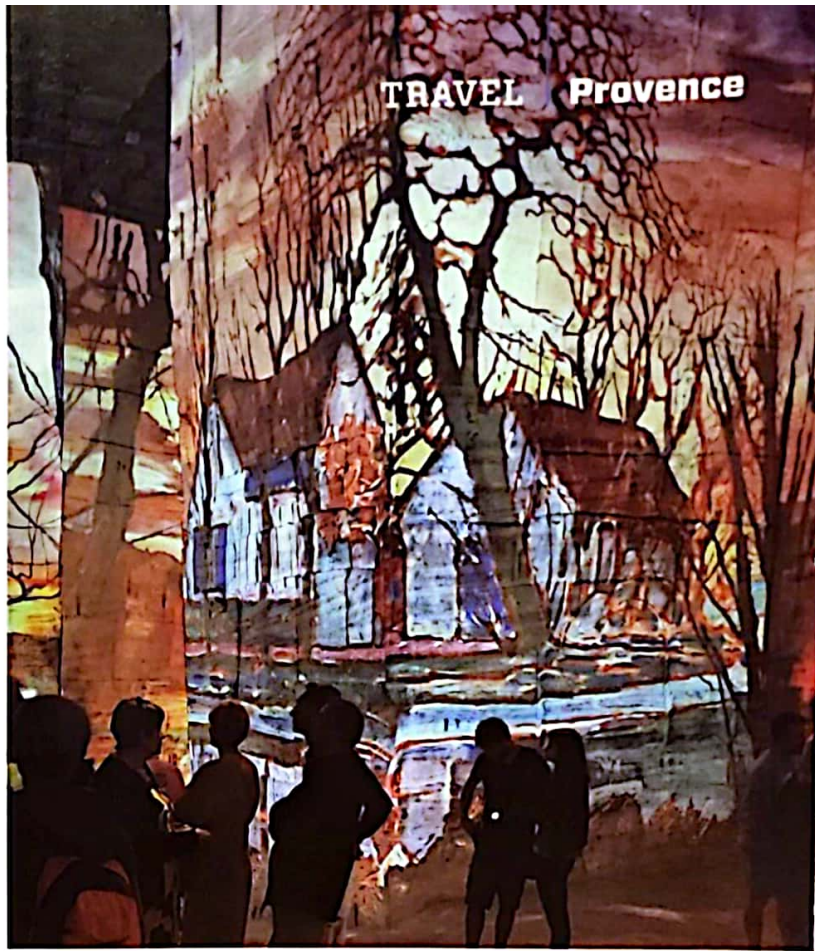
perhaps adding to my appreciation was that the previous day, I had the privilege of a guided tour of the Saint-Paul de Mausole psychiatric hospital, where Vincent van Gogh lived and painted some of his most famous works following a mental health crisis.

After three days in Aix, ChatGPT suggested we head to Saint-Rémy-de-Provence and stop for lunch at the organic winery Château La Coste. Sipping on their rosé and wolfing down an onion tart with goat's cheese and bread – sticking to my pact of cheese and carbs at each meal – I felt well-fuelled enough to take on ChatGPT's suggestion that we 'walk down the art path'. I was expecting a pleasant stroll with some nice sculptures, much akin to the Nirox Sculpture Park. What I wasn't ready for was a two-hour meander of mountain vistas, forest canopies, and varied architectural wonders and art installations featuring works by the likes of Bob Dylan and Tadao Ando. Château La Coste is a haven for art, nature and wine lovers alike.

When it came to cultural and artistic activities, I had to hand it to ChatGPT – my robot assistant was onto something. I probably wouldn't have visited any of these places on my own steam – and I would have missed out.

Aix, in my opinion, was going to be hard to top. But Saint-Rémy-de-Provence offers a different sort of charm. It's much smaller but no less picturesque. The same mixture of jumbled narrow alleyways, buzzing town squares, and main streets lined with eateries and boutiques give it the charming atmosphere that draws thousands of visitors and immigrants to this part of France every year. It's a town where modern jostles with traditional. Somehow, there's space for it all. Stepping into Bistrot Les Pieds dans l'Eau, with its outside bar and cheerfully jumbled tables, you'd be forgiven for thinking you'd arrived at a buzzing tavern in Argentina. Walk inside, though, and you're in a refined Provençal building. Just on the adjacent corner is a courtyard bistro, serving refined plates that would look at home in any Michelin-starred restaurant. And speaking of those, there's no shortage – with two Michelin-starred eateries in the tiny town of under 10 000 people. Yet not everywhere has opted for modern or global style, and indeed, the town still retains plenty of its traditional character. The charming Chapeau de Paille is the sort of bistro that could have been plucked straight from the pages of a French storybook. Handmade pickles, wild boar salami, and the Provençal classic of aioli and fish was followed by handmade profiteroles, all served on cluttered steel tables along the sidewalk.

Of course, no exploration of Provence would be complete without succumbing to the allure of its coastal treasures. Ports, seafood, and colourful waterside facades are all as integral to the Provençal life as the landlocked market towns of Aix, Avignon and Saint-Rémy-de-Provence. Luckily, my itinerary planner had suggested an afternoon in the charming seaside town of Cassis. Named for the French word for blackberry, Cassis is the smaller, quieter cousin of St Tropez and Cannes. Sheltered by the Calanques National Park on one side and Cap Canaille on the other, it remains undeveloped and, as a result, has kept much of its natural beauty intact. The harbour seems to have been plucked



straight from the mind of Van Gogh himself; bobbing boats docked in the water, colourful houses set in the cliffs above, and dogs marching along the promenade, tails wagging as they pass restaurants bursting with clinking cutlery and the scent of seafood wafting from kitchens. If you're in the area, it's worth stopping by if only to experience the buzzing central harbour and main beach.

As we drove to Avignon and boarded the train to Paris to end our days of French countryside living, I couldn't help but reflect on the trip. Would I turn to ChatGPT again? Certainly. Beyond the itinerary, letting go of my usual planning habits helped reinforce the value of embracing spontaneity in travel. In letting go of the reins, I allowed myself to be carried away by the moments that had unfolded.

# Trip Planner



## GETTING THERE

Fly into Nice or Marseilles if you're travelling from elsewhere in Europe. Alternatively, take a train from Paris into Avignon. Once you're in Provence, you will need to rent a car to explore the region properly.

## Stay Here

### AIX-EN-PROVENCE

**HÔTEL AQUABELLA & SPA** features a heated outdoor pool and access to extensive spa facilities, including a Jacuzzi, hammam, and whirlpool. The location just on the edge of the town is convenient and easy to access, and the rooms are modern and well-equipped. From R3 000 pr pn [aquabella.fr](http://aquabella.fr)

**HOTEL AUGUSTINS** is a more typically Provençal-style hotel, which offers affordable rates (starting at R2 700 per room) but plenty of the perks and amenities you'd expect from a more upscale establishment. It's set in the historic city centre within the walls of a 12th-century convent. [hotel-augustins.com](http://hotel-augustins.com)

### SAINT-RÉMY-DE-PROVENCE

**L'AUBERGE DE ST RÉMY** has a Michelin-starred restaurant on site and is located on the main street next to plenty of bars and restaurants. It's perfect for an upmarket hotel with contemporary rooms starting from R4 100 pr pn. [aubergesaintremy.com](http://aubergesaintremy.com)

**HÔTEL DU SOLEIL AND SPA** is 300m outside the town centre, within easy walking distance of restaurants, bars and cafes. Slightly set back from the road, with a heated outdoor pool and safe parking, it's a great choice for families and couples who want more privacy. It's clean, well-equipped and affordable, with rooms starting at R1 600 pn. [hotelsoleil.com](http://hotelsoleil.com)



La terrasse Provençale at Château La Coste



Chapeau De Paille

## Eat Here

### (LE PUY-SAINTE-RÉPARADE)

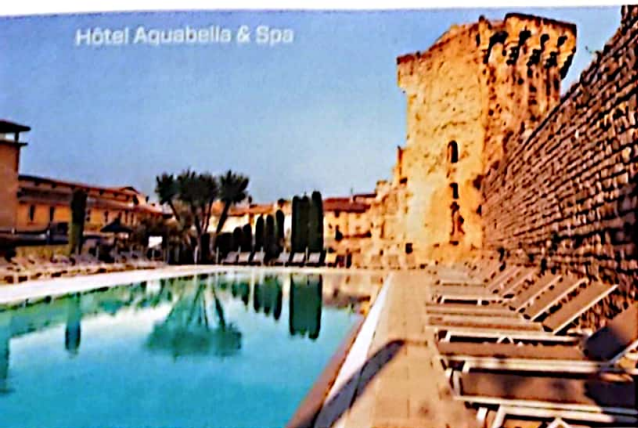
**LA TERRASSE PROVENÇALE AT CHÂTEAU LA COSTE**  
A small, constantly changing menu highlights fresh produce and authentic local dishes. Take the waiter's recommendation. **+33 4 42 61 89 98**, [chateau-la-coste.com](http://chateau-la-coste.com)

offers modern small plates and an extensive wine list with knowledgeable waiters. **+33 4 90 15 73 53**

### SAINT-RÉMY-DE-PROVENCE

**21 CHAI D'OEUVRE** This buzzy wine and tapas bar

**CHAPEAU DE PAILLE** For an authentic taste of Provence that feels like home, make a booking at Chapeau de Paille. **+33 4 90 92 85 78**, [bistrot-chapeaudepaille.com](http://bistrot-chapeaudepaille.com)



Hôtel Aquabella & Spa