

Villeneuve-lez-Avignon

Border town of the Capetian State

In 1290 Philippe IV le Bel exchanged Maine and Anjou for a part of the Avignon seigneurie but, but in order to retain a strategic platform on the border of the kingdom, he founded Villeneuve. He co-signed the foundation charter with the Abbot of Saint-André following the act of partnership* in 1292. This contract aimed to fortify access to the Avignon bridge, which was carried out around 1300-1307 by rebuilding the fortress, known as the Philippe-le-Bel tower, on the west bank.

From 1302, the king challenged the ownership of the river and the Avignon port. During the Avignon papacy, the tensions continued and the quarrel between the two banks carried on until the Revolution. This royal desire to fortify the right bank of the Rhone no doubt accompanied the ambition to compete with the powerful city of Avignon, by creating a new town at the foot of the mount.

Papal holiday destination

From 1305 to 1376, the dignitaries of the papal court made the more rural right bank their holiday destination. Pope Clement VI owned a large property there. In the middle of the 14th century, 12 cardinals had residences there, with gardens and orchards, among them Etienne Aubert, whose home was built on the side of mount Andaon. When he became Pope Innocent IV, he founded, in 1356, the Val-de-Bénédiction charterhouse which you can still visit today.

* Explanations overleaf.

Glossary

Administrative Officer: in the south of France, this was a royal officer, known as a ‘*Viguier*’, responsible for administration and justice.

Avignon papacy: the troubles in Italy obliged the popes to settle in Avignon from 1309 to 1378. Seven successive popes led the Roman Catholic Church during this period.

Calade: this was a steep cobbled street made of Rhone pebbles.

Merelle: this was a very popular game in the 14th century. It was played with counters and the aim was to line up a series of three counters on 24 defined points.

Partnership act: this defined the rights of possession as well as management procedures in the seigneurie.

Stonemasons’ marks: each stonemason ‘signed’ his work in the stone and thus established the amount he would be paid.

Practical information

Average length of visit: 45 minutes

Visit commentary in French

The Centre des monuments nationaux publishes a collection of guidebooks about French monuments translated into several languages. Éditions du patrimoine publications are on sale in the bookshop-giftshop.

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Fort Saint-André

Guardian of the kingdom

A symbol of rivalry

Overlooking a Roman bridge on the Rhone, the Andaon Mount is an ideal rocky outcrop



The entrance of the fort

for a lookout. In the 10th century, it was made up of a village and the Saint-André abbey. At the same time, Avignon was being developed on the

other bank thanks to the bridge. But in the 12th century, the kings of France were looking for a way to expand the kingdom towards the south and the Rhone became a border. Louis VIII (1223-1226)** signed a partnership* act with the Saint-André abbot and agreed to fortify the hill. The Abbot withdrew from the authority of the Bishop of Avignon and, from then on, the two banks were in opposition, the French on the west and the Provençal on the east.

A symbol of royal power

To compete with Avignon, Philippe IV le Bel (1285 – 1314)** founded a new city on the west bank. The mount fortifications were built under the direction of Jean II le Bon (1350 – 1364)***, during the time of the insecurity caused by the Hundred Years War, while the popes were living in Avignon*. The fort lost its strategic role when Provence once again became part of France in 1481, and even more so once the Rhone riverbed moved 900 metres away from the mount, in about 1770. The fort was maintained by the military authorities until 1792. It was listed as a historical monument in 1906.

* Explanations overleaf.

** Dates refer to beginning and end of reign.



The fort was constructed in the 1360s, quickly and economically, the royal finances having been depleted by the ransom paid to the English to free King Jean le Bon. At this time, Provence was ravaged by bands of mercenaries.

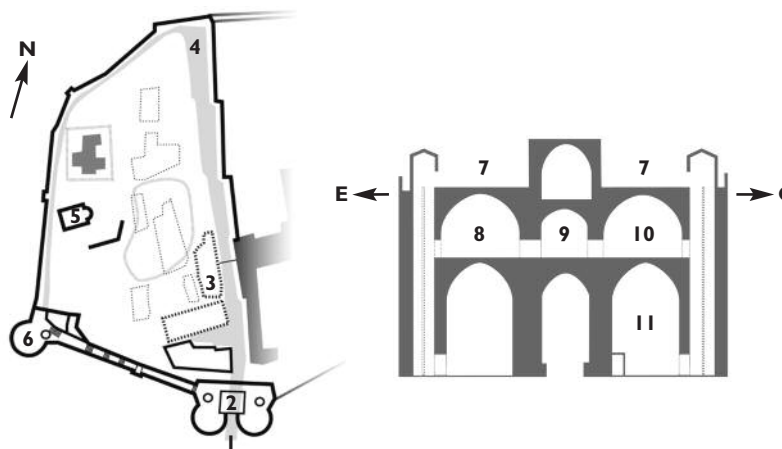
The Saint-André château

- 1 The entrance fortress**, called the royal château or, locally, 'the twin towers', was built in several stages. It ensured the defence and command of the fort and afforded an uninterrupted view of the Ventoux mount as far as the Alpilles. It still has a crown of machicolations and meets the parapet walk at the top of the curtain wall. It housed the working quarters of the châtelain and the administrative and judicial officer*.
- 2 The long entrance passage** had two portcullises forming an ante-chamber protected by a vertical murder-hole and lateral arrow loops. Outside, the shield situated between the towers has been destroyed. It carried the King's coat of arms and that of the Abbot of Saint-André, symbol of the partnership* negotiated with the latter for the construction of the fort.

Saint-André village

Walls and towers protect a vast area of more than 3 hectares. The current reception area and the neighbouring building were used in the 18th century as the military headquarters and the garrison.

- 3 One Renaissance house remains**, of the 190 dwellings that existed in the 17th century on the mount.
- 4 The end of the calade*** affords a view over the old marshland, now drained and cultivated.



- 5 The Belvezet chapel** (Bellevue) is an illustration of the sober architectural style of the second half of the 12th century in Bas Rhone. It was used as the parish chapel until the 14th century. Outside, its polygonal apse is decorated with lombard rings with fine mouldings. On the left of the entrance, the gallery stairs are remarkable for the absence of a central newel.

The fortifications

The fortification walls are 750m long and present a dual system of defence from the 14th century including arrow loops at ground level protected by recesses, and merlons with arrow loops at the top of walls, to protect the wall walk. But this ambitious fortification project was curtailed during construction to simple curtain walls dotted with arrow loops supporting the wall walk on the western side. Only the southern side, the easiest to scale and thus the most vulnerable, followed the initial plan. But comfort was not forgotten: there were latrines, fireplaces in the entrance fortress and sentry boxes on the wall walk.

- 6 The Masques tower** takes its name from the provençal 'masco', meaning witch or magician, reputed to attract the wicked spells so that the rest of the battlements were protected. The tower has a single high room because of the unevenness of the site. There are numerous stonemasons' marks* as well as soldiers' and prisoners' graffiti; there is a 'merelle'* game on the floor and templars' crosses to the left of the right hand arrow loop on entering.
- 7 From the terraces of the entrance fortress**, the Philippe-le-Bel tower can be seen on the right, built between 1292 and 1304 and, opposite, the Papal Palace begun in 1335. The fortress towers have two levels.
- 8 The prisoners' covered yard** on the first floor, has a barrel-vaulted ceiling. It presents prisoners graffiti from the 18th and 19th centuries: names, drawings, symbols denoting membership of guilds.
- 9 The portcullis room** contains the winches needed to raise and lower them.
- 10 The bread oven room** appears to have been created in 1629 during the quarantine imposed by the plague. An adjoining room, with preserved paving, could have been a food store although it also presents prisoners' graffiti.
- 11 The administration officer's* room**, seat of the court of justice, presents rib vaulting. The royal arms figure on a keystone. The fireplace is flanked by stone projections to hold lighting. The châtelain lived in the other twin tower, which is closed to visitors.

* Explanations overleaf.