

HIP

HOTELS

FRANCE

HERBERT YPMA

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Herbert Ypma is the founder of the award-winning magazine *Interior Architecture* and creator of the bestselling World Design series, mould-breaking visual sourcebooks that have set a new standard in interior-design publishing. **HIP HOTELS: FRANCE** is the third volume in his latest revolutionary series.

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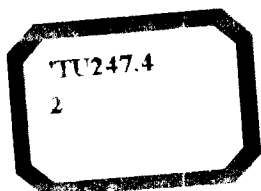
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 **Thames & Hudson**

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introduction

I confess I am a Francophile. Not only that, I am a third-generation Francophile. My father spent all his student summers in France armed with nothing more than a bicycle, a tent and a slab of Camembert; my mother was an *au pair* in Paris. After a honeymoon largely courtesy of the generosity of French farmers and their paddocks, they have been back – *sans tente* – every year since. Before that, my grandfather used to make an annual pilgrimage to Val d'Isère for wintersports adventures back in the days when you still had to climb up before you could ski down.

Admittedly a lot has changed since then, but the appeal of France endures. The uniquely Gallic blend of nature, culture and food is difficult to resist. Not only does France have the highest mountains, the best beaches, the most enchanting villages and the most magnificent rivers in Europe, but it also has a rich culture in art, architecture, design and of course food that enhances these attractions all the more. In France you don't just admire the natural beauty, you truly enjoy it. Because chances are when you have finished a dip in the Atlantic or a day skiing in the Alps, you

will eat and sleep in a place that completes the experience of where you are. The cuisine and the culture of France intensify an already rewarding and varied travel experience. From the rugged coast of Brittany to the dramatic gorges and canyons of the Midi Pyrénées; from the green and castle-studded countryside of Burgundy to the sunburned Mediterranean landscape of Provence, the country is like a jigsaw puzzle of different pieces sharing a common language yet worlds apart in geography and culture.

That doesn't mean, however, that these experiences are easy to find. France too has its eyesores. Fast-food chains and spectacularly unattractive hypermarkets have sprung up all over, particularly on the outskirts of larger towns. But the romantic idyll that makes France such a travel magnet for the French as much as for foreigners has not perished; it has simply become more elusive. And that is the point of this book. It introduces a selection of outstanding hotel experiences that offer the France that we all want: the authentic France, the romantic France, the delicious France ... the Francophile's France.





villa gallici

'When I'm in Aix I feel like I should be somewhere else and when I'm somewhere else I miss Aix ... being born there is hopeless, nothing else in life will mean more.'

Cézanne was deeply attached to his home town of Aix-en-Provence. He returned here later in life, and was regularly to be found taking his daily apéritif at one of the many legendary cafés on the Cours Mirabeau, the town's main thoroughfare. The landscape of Aix, above all the Mont Sainte-Victoire, was the overwhelming inspiration of his paintings. To Cézanne, the light and colours of Provence, along with those of Italy and Greece, were the very source of great art. He dedicated his life to the quest to capture them on canvas.

Cézanne and his boyhood friend Émile Zola have become the town's most famous sons. Aix has certainly made the most of them. Every Saturday there is a guided tour called 'In the Footsteps of Cézanne' and on Tuesdays there's a Zola equivalent called 'A Literary Stroll'. Cézanne's atelier has been preserved as a museum, and no less than thirty-two locations in the city have been singled out as having played a role in the life of this enormously influential artist. The irony of all this adulation is that Aix didn't actually own a Cézanne

painting until 1984, when the French state finally consigned a handful of small canvases to the Musée Granet.

Cézanne or no Cézanne, it's easy to see the attraction of this beautiful and refined town. It is blessed not just with a perfect light and climate but also with a far-reaching cultural pedigree. Medieval capital of Provence, Aix was established on the foundations a Roman settlement built by the conquering proconsul Sextius Calvinus. He called it *Aquae Sextiae* after the site's thermal springs (and himself, of course). Roman citizens came here for spa cures, an attraction that still draws tourists today: Picasso and Churchill both took the waters at the Thermes Sextius. After the Romans, the next great moulder of the city's character was the good King René. René was actually King of Anjou and in Provence he was little more than a count, but that didn't prevent him making Aix in the fifteenth century a great centre of Renaissance learning and the arts.

With its forty fountains and innumerable squares, trees and cafés, Aix is a place of aesthetic serenity, a quiet spot in the shade that is in every way the welcome antithesis of neighbouring Marseilles, with its hectic pace, frenetic noise and non-stop hustle and bustle.





All in all, the beauty, the peace, the colours, the light and the history make this town quite irresistible. No wonder then that Gil Dez, Charles Montemarco and Daniel Jouve were so persistent in their quest to persuade old Monsieur Gallici to sell his villa. They knew that this Italianate mansion, ideally situated in a park on the outskirts of the old town, would make a great hotel. Dez and his partners were focused on one idea – that of creating an authentic Aix experience, such as was no longer to be found in the city. They meant authentic in every respect – in architecture, design, and of course food.

The results of their perseverance are utterly convincing. Twenty-eight rooms and five suites, all completely different, but all resolutely Provençal in style. There are rooms with abundant white, rooms painted in bright southern colours, some cosy, some with lots of fabrics and some in the black and pistachio shades favoured by Christian Lacroix, also a son of the Midi. Most charming and most

convincing of all is the ambience. It's as if they have taken the pleasure and atmosphere of a stroll down the Cours Mirabeau and transplanted it – water, trees and all – to the terrace of Villa Gallici.

For most of the year, this terrace serves as the lobby, breakfast room and dining room of the hotel. Traditional Provençal dishes are served under dappled sunlight beside the tinkling waters of an old fountain. At dinner both the tables and guests are a little more dressed up. A typical menu from Jean Marc Banzo, chef of Gallici's restaurant Le Clos de Violette, might include ravioli of *mousseuses* with a *jus* of truffles, or a *galinette* of fish in a bouillabaisse sauce, followed by a pear tart with a reduced wine sauce.

Villa Gallici has been described as 'all that is enjoyable about Italy presented in the best French manner'. On a warm summer's evening, as the elegant guests are wafted by the perfume of jasmine and the faint strains of the opera, it's not hard to understand why.

address Villa Gallici, Avenue de la Violette, 13100 Aix-en-Provence

telephone (33) 4 42 23 29 23 **fax** (33) 4 42 96 30 45

room rates from FF 1,500 (suites from FF 3,300)





nord pinus



Founded in the heart of Arles at the end of the nineteenth century, this hotel had its days of glory in the period after the second world war, when Nello Bessières, the famed tightrope-walking clown of the Medrano Circus, became the proprietor. He and his wife Germaine, an extrovert and extravagant former cabaret dancer, were determined this would not be another modest little provincial hotel. Together they set out to reinvent Nord Pinus as *the* place to stay in the Midi.

The hotel's *livre d'or* was signed in the fifties by everyone who was anyone. Christian Bérard, Paul Klee, Charles Trenet, Mistinguett, Louis Jouvét, Sacha Guitry, King Farouk and Yves Montand are just some of the big names that attended the flamboyant balls, parties and other occasions that were continually dreamed up by the Bessières. Nord Pinus became a byword for the worldly, the intellectual, and the artistic; and, this being the Camargue, the bullfighting centre of France, it also became a temple to *tauromachie*, the cult of the bull. For centuries Arles has lived according to the seasonal rhythms of the *ferias*, the festivals devoted to bullfighting. In the Camargue, unlike in Spain or other parts of France, the bullfight is not a fight to the death – at least not

for the animal. It is more often the *razeteurs* or runners, as they are known here, who get hurt. By tradition Germaine would always reserve room 10 for visiting heroes of the bullring.

Black-and-white vintage photographs throughout the hotel depict the matadors in their brilliant outfits and black capes, attesting to a period that for many locals was their city's finest hour. The legendary matador Luis-Miguel Dominguín, Picasso in his familiar blue-and-white *tricot*, and Cocteau, always the dandy, were often to be found together in the company of Germaine. After a fight Dominguín would appear on the balcony of room 10 to receive an ovation from the ecstatic crowd gathered in the Place de Forum below.

No party, however, can last forever. The death of Nello in 1969 left Germaine distraught. Overcome by grief, she lost interest in the hotel. Bit by bit the clientele, disillusioned by the disarray of rooms that were once so attractively kept, abandoned Nord Pinus. Things went from bad to worse. The restaurant silver was sold to pay the few employees who remained, and eventually, unavoidably, Nord Pinus went bankrupt. But Germaine refused to leave, and installed herself in one of the former guest rooms of the now deserted hotel.