Tarascon

Legends and heritage treasures



LE CŒUR DE LA PROVENCE
Tarascon



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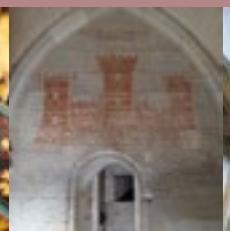

Tarascon,
a multifaceted heritage

Built along the banks of the Rhône and serving as a royal residence for the Dukes of Anjou until the XVth century, Tarascon possesses an exceptional heritage, including over twenty classified monuments. Its history comes from both historical events and legends. Through this guide, discover the key sites, monuments, and figures that make up the rich heritage diversity of this Provençal jewel.

Explore the treasures of Tarascon, wander through its streets, and observe the vibrant soul of this town, steeped in centuries-old traditions and renowned craftsmanship.










Urban HERITAGE

King René's Castle

Built between 1400 and 1435 by Louis II and Louis III, duke of Provence and earl of Anjou, King René's Castle is one of France's prettiest fortress. Built on an elevated rock, it has the role of a monumental guardian and constitutes the territorial basis of their ambitions in the Mediterranean, notably with the control of the political border of the Rhône until 1481.

René 1st, also designated as Good King René called in French as "Le bon roi René", son of Louis II only arranged it to increase comfort and esthetic in order to transform it into a meeting and festivities spot with a prestigious appearance.





On the day of his death, Provence is reattached to the French Kingdom. The castle then becomes a royal property and turns into a prison for civilians and European militaries.

From 1840, it was on the first list of historical monuments' protection.

Open to visits since 1933, it became a Tarascon property in 2008. It welcomes permanent and temporary exhibitions and workshops are programmed during the whole year notably during Easter, Halloween or even during the Tarasque festivities which happen at the end of June. A playful familial visit is also proposed during which every sense is mobilized.

On site, a library/shop is open and sells diverse products adapted to every visitor : many publications, local products, knights' costumes, games, etc.







Saint-Martha's Church

During the IVth Century, a first basilica was built to welcome Saint Martha's coffin. During year 500, Clovis, very ill, comes to the basilica to pray.

During the Xth Century, the church, which was deeply damaged after barbarians invasions, was completely rebuilt by King Aragon who became count of Provence.

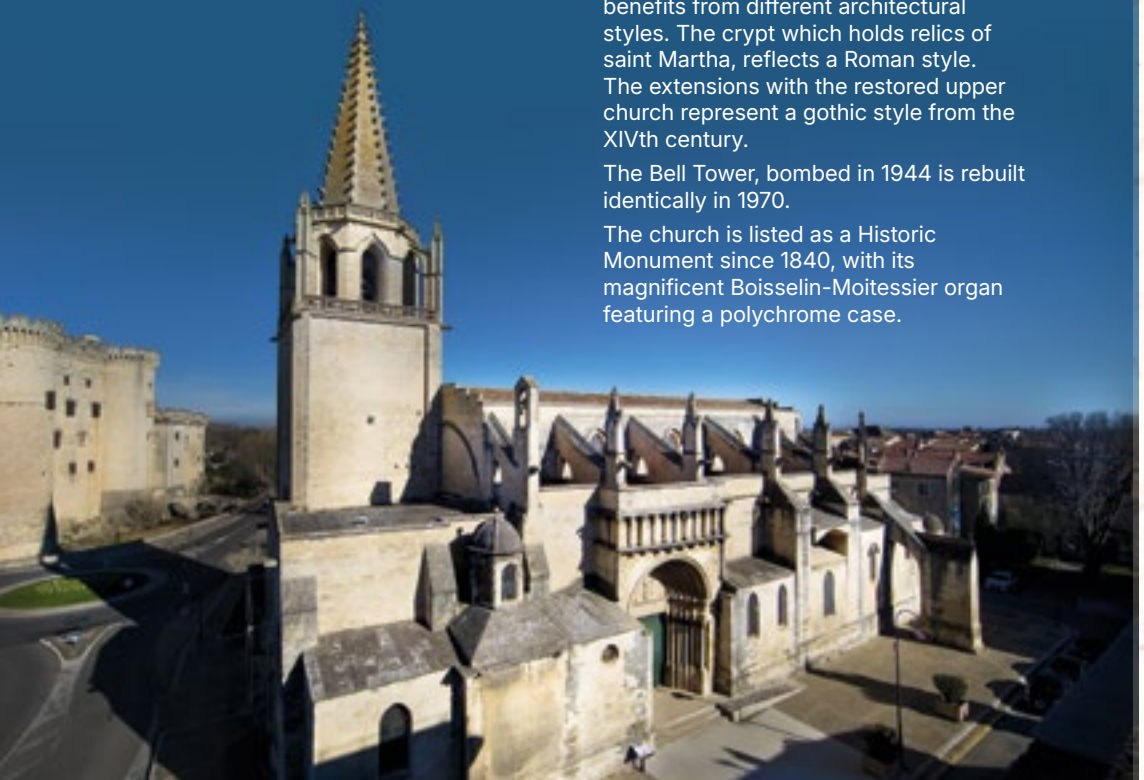
In 1187, relics from saint Martha were discovered, already venerated by the residents. The church then becomes one of the most important sanctuaries in Provence, a place of pilgrimage such as Jerusalem, Rome, or Compostela, and where numerous miracles are accomplished. As a sign of gratitude, gifts are offered to the saint. The most beautiful are the reliquary bust of 35kg in pure gold offered by Louis XI and many paintings of masters illustrating the life of the saint.



Remodeled during centuries, the church benefits from different architectural styles. The crypt which holds relics of saint Martha, reflects a Roman style. The extensions with the restored upper church represent a gothic style from the XIVth century.

The Bell Tower, bombed in 1944 is rebuilt identically in 1970.

The church is listed as a Historic Monument since 1840, with its magnificent Boisselin-Moitessier organ featuring a polychrome case.



Who is saint Martha?



Martha is Marie-Madeleine and Lazare's sister. She is a noble woman who came from Béthanie in Palestine, she is part of Christianism's Holy Women. Considered one of the apostles of Christ, she is said to have arrived by boat in Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer and to have traveled up the Rhône River to Tarascon. Persecuted by Tarasque, the residents begged her to come for help. Saint Martha accepts, tames and captures the beast and brings it to the civilians who kill it. She took up residence in Tarascon, where she became the patron saint and died in the year 68.

Saint Martha is now celebrated on a yearly basis, during the Tarasque festivities on the last weekend of June and on 29 July.

Since 1995, while promoting saint Martha's cult, associations *Les amis de la collégiale Sainte-Marthe, le l'église Saint-Jacques et la Confrérie des Consorelles de sainte Marthe* organise pilgrimages during which they welcome visitors and pilgrims.



Procession of saint Martha's relics

During the Tarasque festivities, the saint chief of the city, saint Martha is celebrated. Usually from 5:30pm, at the church, we can assist in the Liturgy of the Word of Saint Martha with the *Prieurs de Saint-Marthe* and the *Voix Provençales*. Then, from 6:15pm, from the castle next to the church, before the start of the procession, troubadours, musicians, soldiers, ladies and maidens, squires, commoners, and knights honor their holy patroness. It is only around 6:30 that the procession of saint Martha's relics starts, in the historical center, with the participation of medieval groups, traditions and the Tarasque. Finally, from 7:15pm at place de la Concorde, the procession ends with the benediction of the Tarasque and *Tarascaïres*, men responsible for carrying and manœuvring the effigy of the Tarasque during traditional festivals.

The Tarasque Festivities

On April 14th 1474, King René created les Jeux de la Tarasque, half religious and half secular festivities allowing to make the castle more alive. In order to reduce social inequalities in the city of Tarascon and honor the motto "Concordia Felix", more than 100 characters are interpreted by the locals. During these days, a race of the Tarasque is organised, the beast made of cardboard first and then of wood goes through the streets and the residents take part in games and dances.
Between religious and provincial traditions, the Tarasque festivities take place during the last weekend of June and last 4 days. Martha and the Tarasque but also Alphonse Daudet and his character Tartarin of Tarascon. At this occasion, the numerous visitors have access to medieval workshops inside the castle as well as different Camargue traditions with horses and bulls. Since 2005, they have been registered in the oral and immaterial heritage of humanity by UNESCO.



The Tarasque

Around 1255, Jacque de Voragine describes the Tarasque in "The golden Legend": "There was, at this time, [...] a beast half-animal half-fish, bigger than a bull and longer than a horse with teeth resembling long swords and as big as horns, which was armed with two big shields on his sides".

According to the legend, when the boat transporting the Tarasque to the amphitheatre sank, the beast escaped in the Rhône and took as a home the rock on which King René's castle will later be built. This extraordinary creature terrorises people living in Tarascon, whom tries to kill it, always failed.

Also, on a random day in year 48, saint Martha, who came to evangelize Lower Provence, arrived in Tarascon. She decided to defy the Tarasque after numerous requests. Helped by her faith and the christian cross, she tames the Tarasque and secures its submissions. She puts a leash around its neck and gives it to the residents in order to kill it.

Obviously, there are different versions, concerning the legend and the description of the Tarasque whose representation is visible at Les Cordeliers-museum of Art and History. It is also represented on the city's coat of arms or on the church's doors.





LET'S MEET

at the Cordeliers-museum of Art and History and guess which animals correspond the different parts of the Tarasque's body.

Answer : Tortoise shell, dragon tail, half-lion/half-human head with horse ears and mane, six bear paws. Its red legendary eyes are replaced by lights that glow during the pégoulades (Provençal term for a lively, chaotic procession). An articulated lower jaw brings it to life, adding to its fearsome look. The current effigy was crafted by Tony Camacho and completed by his son, Mickaël, in 2002.

The Order of the Knights of the Tarasque



Founded on April 14th 1474 by King René in order to maintain the Tarasque Festivities, The Order of the Knights of the Tarasque has well defined status:

- Celebrate the "games of the Tarasque" at least six times in a century.
- Respect the ceremony, always make the festivities more brilliant during five days.
- Welcome, in the best way, every stranger coming during the festivities.

Once, the number of the Tarasque's knights, also called "Tarascaïres", could vary between 12 and 18. They were chosen between the city's notable and inducted on the Monday of Easter. They named their chief "l'Abbé" which means Grand Master and who was the master of ceremonies of the game of the Tarasque.

Today they are around 10 and recognizable, during local festivities, by their costumes composed of a white satin shirt and pink breeches with a hat with pink and white plume. This specific hat was designed by Christian Guiot who is today the head of the "Tarascaïres" and has been for over 40 years.



The Cordeliers Museum of Art and History



Tarascon was once a city with around 15 religious communities. One of the oldest ones, the Cordeliers, is attached to the Franciscans who, until the revolution, establishes its abbey next to la rue des Halles of which only a cloister and the former parlor remain.

The museum represented one of the key sites of the patrimonial heart of the city. Implanted in the ancient cloister, it holds permanent exhibitions such as the galerie of the legendary Tarasque, the "Course de la Tarasque" and Tartarin's Cabinet of Curiosities. It holds also, throughout the year, temporary exhibitions.

One of the main piece of this museum est obviously the Tarasque, impressive and enigmatic beast described by the poet Frédéric Mistral in his work of 1859 "Mireio".

« The beast has a dragon's tail,
and eyes redder than cinnabar.
Upon its back, scales and stings that strike fear.
It bears the muzzle of a great lion,
and has six human feet, to run the better;
in its cavern, beneath a rock that towers
over the Rhône, it drags away whatever it can.»

« La bèstio a la co d'un coulobre,
d'iue mai rouge qu'un cinobre
Sus l'esquino a d'escaumo e d'àsti que fan paur
D'un gros leinoun porto lou mourre,
E sièis pèd d'ome pèr mies courre;
Dins sa caforno, souta un moure
Que doumino lou Rose, emporto ce que peu. »



Tartarin of Tarascon

In 1872, Alphonse Daudet published " The prodigious adventures of Tartarin of Tarascon", a book in which he tells the adventures of the well known anti-hero Tartarin, intrepid cap hunter.

But who is this character? Forever, Tartarin, hunter, dreams of expeditions and reads numerous travel books. Talkative, braggart, liar, even himself doesn't believe in his lies. Having never left Tarascon, he nevertheless claims to be a great hunter and decides to set off to hunt lions in Africa. When he returns, he tells his exploits to everyone, who now consider him as their hero. Even though it is a caricature of the southern temperament, this character is known worldwide and made the town of Tarascon famous.

Today, on the Louis Gonthier Square, a bronze sculpture commemorates Daudet and his character. Tartarin is also present at Les Cordeliers-museum of Art and History in his dedicated space.





Did you know ?

Chapatin, Barbarin, No Tartarin !

In 1863, was published for the first time, the story from Alphonse Daudet "Chapatin, lion killer". Then in 1870, Figaro published the text "Barbarin from Tarascon" with the title "The Don Quichotte provençal or the prodigious adventures of Barbarin from Tarascon in France and in Algeria". This displeased Mr. Barbarin de Montfrin, who brought a lawsuit; thus, in 1872, Alphonse Daudet decided to change his hero's name to Tartarin!



Municipal Theatre

In 1828, a performance space was opened in the gothic church from the Dominicans which will then be burnt down in 1884. The city undertook the renovations in order to bring the site back alive.

Inaugurated in 1888 by a representation of the "Barbier de Séville" from Rossini, the actual theatre, one of the most remarkable Italian styled theatre of the region, is a true elegant and refined masterpiece designed by the architect Joseph Marius Letz. Above the red curtains, we can read the following sentence: "Deus nobis haec otia fecit" which means "A god has granted us these leisures".

Ten years later, the sculptor from Tarascon, Jean-Barnabé Amy, fashioned a pediment for the main façade, depicting a lyre, the symbol of song and poetry, supported by two angels.

A place of leisure and performance featuring comic operas, tragedies, musicals, and other productions. Many celebrities came on this stage, including, among the most famous ones, Joséphine Baker, Fernandel, Tino Rossi, Yves Montand and even Edith Piaf.

Registered at the Historical Monuments since 1980, renovations have been organised in order to reopen to the public at the end of 2022 and to program rich and varied theatrical seasons.



Saint-Jacques' Church

Based in the city center of Tarascon where an old medieval church was based, the Saint-Jacques' church was built between 1740 and 1750.

The facade, with its classical style, is made of Beaucaire stone, the neighbouring town. The baroque style dominates in the interior architecture, the 18th-century baldachin and organ originate from the Ursuline convent. The site has been listed as a Historic Monument since 1994.

The church is open to the public exclusively during religious services and the European Heritage Days.





Artisanal HERITAGE

Souleiado Museum



Based in the Aiminy mansion, magnificent building from the XVth century in the heart of Tarascon, the luxurious provincial house exposes a collection of fabulous treasures, gathered since the site was established in 1939 by Charles Démery.

Inheriting a tradition of *Indiennes* textile manufacturing dating back to 1806 with the Manufacture Jourdan, later purchased in 1882 by Paul Véran and in 1916 by Charles Henri Démery, the «Souleiado» brand was born in 1939 under the direction of Charles Démery.

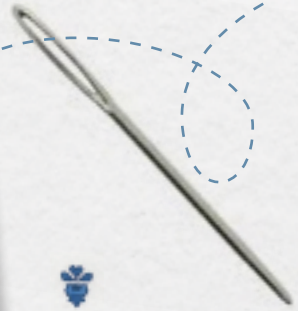
Now transformed into a museum, it is a must-visit destination for those interested in Provençal textiles. Through its collections of fabrics, traditional 19th-century costumes, magnificent quilts, and other Provençal artifacts, it takes lovers of Provençal culture on a journey through time. The most iconic part of the museum is undoubtedly the kitchen, which houses the printing workshop. This area contains a collection of nearly one hundred numbered, XVIIth-century wooden printing blocks, which, through layering, allow for the creation of the brand's characteristic motifs.

In the mansion's inner courtyard, a boutique featuring the brand is open to visitors all year round.



Did you know?

In Provençal, Souleiado means sunshine, or more specifically that moment when the sun's rays break through the clouds after the rain.



Ciergerie des Prémontrés



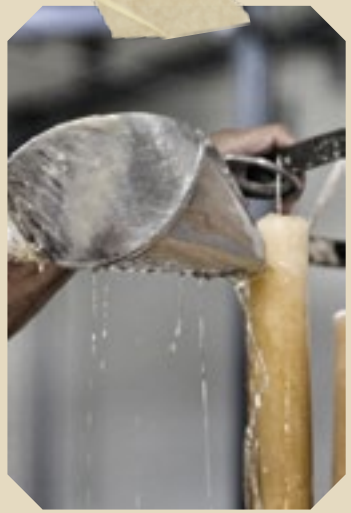
Founded in 1858 by the White Fathers of the Abbey of Prémontrés, the *Ciergerie des Prémontrés* is an authentic, exceptional workshop, the very last of its kind in Provence. For centuries, it has perpetuated ancestral traditions through the mastery of recognized manufacturing techniques, thereby embodying the excellence of French craftsmanship. Three distinct techniques have earned the workshop the title of *Master Chandler* and the prestigious *Living Heritage Company label*.

"À la louche": A delicate, manual technique dating back to the Middle Ages, considered the «haute couture» of candle-making. It involves crafting candles of exceptional quality with a perfectly uniform diameter from top to bottom, even in extraordinary, large-scale dimensions.

"À la plongée": A XVth-century technique used to create candles, which are thinner at the top. Each candle features a unique finish and offers a superior burn time.

Wax statuary molding requires the mastery of traditional techniques and the experience gained through countless creations. Each piece is hand-finished.









Rural HERITAGE



Saint-Victor's Chapel

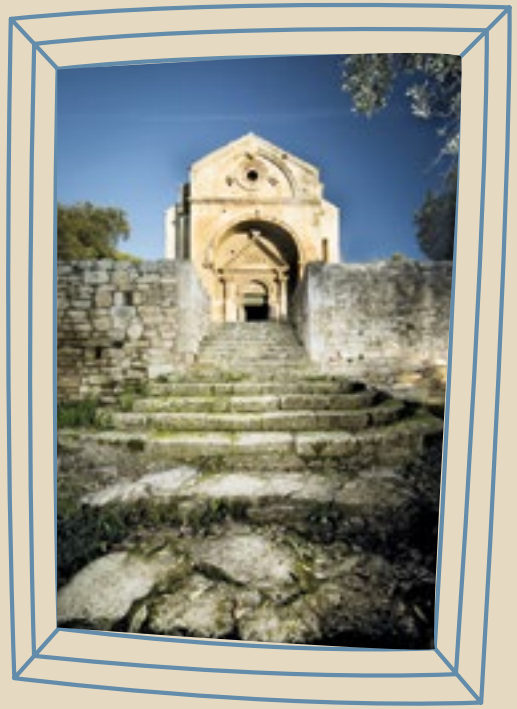
North of Tarascon, the Saint-Victor's chapel has existed since the end of the IXth century. Located on the site of an ancient Gallo-Roman villa, along the route of the old road between Tarascon and Avignon, not far from the modern road that leads to Boulbon. It has been listed as a Historic Monument since 1973.



Notre-Dame-de-Lansac

Located on the road of Arles and in the antic city Ernaginum, destroyed in 480, the chapel of Lansac was a refuge for many civilians trying to escape at the time. Built around 1009, this small roman chapel, placed under the invocation of *Notre-Dame-de-l'Assomption*, was also attached to the chapter of Arles in the XIIth century. In 1971, it was listed as a Historic Monument.





Saint-Gabriel's Chapel

Perched on a hill in the Alpilles Regional Natural Park, the Saint-Gabriel's Chapel is dedicated to the saint whose name it bears. Located at the crossroads of the Via Domitia and Via Aurelia, surrounded by an Aleppo pine forest and the ruins of Ernaginum, it is a true masterpiece of Southern Romanesque art, particularly noted for its richly decorated portal.

It has been classified as a Historic Monument since 1840.

Visits are organised on certain Sundays and during specific events throughout the year, the chapel also hosts exhibitions.



Saint-Michel de Frigolet Abbey

Located in the heart of the Montagnette, the abbey owes its name to thyme, *ferigoulo* in Provençal, which is highly abundant in this mountain range. For nearly a millennium, this center of spirituality has been home to a religious community of Premonstratensians, a group of canons regular. The earliest manuscript dates back to 1133, with Guillaume de Loubières serving as prior of this same community during the time of the Avignon Pope, John XXII.

The Cloister, the Saint-Michel's church, and the Notre-Dame du Bon-Remède's chapel date from the XIIth and XIVth centuries, while the Chapter House dates from the XVIIth century.

According to tradition, Anne of Austria, Queen of France, visited Saint-Michel de Frigolet to pray for the birth of a child. In September 1638, she gave birth to Louis Dieudonné, the future Louis XIV. As a gesture of gratitude, she reportedly gifted the Chapelle du Bon-Remède the wooden baroque décor and twelve paintings created by students of the Avignon School of Mignard.



The abbey church, built in the 1860s in the Neo-Gothic style of the era, was dedicated to the Immaculate Conception and Saint Joseph by Father Jean-Baptiste Boulbon. It was elevated to the dignity of a minor basilica by Pope John Paul II in 1984.

Today, the community at Saint-Michel de Frigolet consists of two priests, one brother, and a novice. The site also serves as a place for spiritual retreats.

Since 2015, the abbey has been listed as a Historic Monument..





Find your perfect souvenir !

The site features an on-site shop offering artisanal products, including the famous Frigolet beers, created by a brother of the community, and liqueurs, such as the renowned «Norbertine.» You will also find natural artisanal syrups available exclusively on-site. The shop also carries honey, olive oil, books, and a rich variety of souvenirs.



Notre-Dame du Château

Located in the heart of the Alpilles, in the neighboring town of Saint-Étienne-du-Grès, the Notre-Dame du Château pilgrimage chapel has also been especially cherished by the people of Tarascon since the Middle Ages.

Around 1350, in a chapel near the castle, a hermit named Imbert is said to have brought an ancient Madonna from Briançon, carved from a tree stump. Since the Jewish quarter was nearby, its residents offered to fund the construction of a chapel in a different district so they would no longer be in constant contact with the Christian population coming to venerate the Virgin of Briançon. The proposal was accepted, and a chapel was erected between Tarascon and Saint-Rémy-de-Provence.

Since 1420, on the Sunday preceding Ascension Day, the people of Tarascon and the surrounding area have participated in the pilgrimage of the Virgin from the old chapel to the Sainte-Marthe church. She remains there for forty days before being returned to the sanctuary in the Alpilles.

In 1926, the chapel was listed as a Historic Monument.



Practical Information

CHÂTEAU DU ROI RENÉ (King René's Castle)
Boulevard du roi René - 13150 Tarascon
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chateau.tarascon.fr

LES CORDELIERS - ART AND HISTORY MUSEUM
2, place Frédéric Mistral - 13150 Tarascon
+33 (0)4 90 91 38 71
chateau.tarascon.fr/musee-arthistoire

MUNICIPAL THEATER
2, rue Eugène Pelletan - 13150 Tarascon
+33 (0)4 90 91 51 02
www.tarascon.fr/le-théâtre

SOULEIADO MUSEUM
39, rue Charles Deméry - 13150 Tarascon
+33 (0)4 90 91 08 80
www.souleiado.com/fr/le-musee

CIERGERIE DES PRÉMONTRÉS (Candle-making Workshop)
Z.A du Roubian
20, rue des Charpentiers - 13150 Tarascon
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