

# PONT-SAINT-ESPRIT

## TOURIST GUIDE 2025 HISTORY AND HERITAGE



# HISTORY OF PONT-SAINT-ESPRIT

## • Ancient origins

Located on a strategic site at the crossroads of Roman roads linking Arles to Valence, the town established itself from Antiquity as an essential crossing point on the Rhône. The topography of the place, which favoured trade and the control of river and land traffic, foreshadowed the commercial and strategic role the town would retain over the centuries.

## • Medieval foundations

In the Middle Ages, the village of Saint-Saturnin-du-Port, the town's original name, developed from the year 948 around the Cluniac priory of Saint-Pierre. This initial religious nucleus gradually attracted a population of merchants and artisans. The construction of the Bridge of the Holy Spirit between 1265 and 1309 marked a decisive turning point: a true technical feat, this monumental structure ensured the link between Provence and Languedoc, reinforcing the city's economic rise. The bridge gave the town its new identity and its current name, Pont-Saint-Esprit.

## • Wars of Religion

In the 16th and 17th centuries, Pont-Saint-Esprit became a Catholic stronghold opposing Protestant Vivarais established on the right bank of the Rhône. The town fortified itself and took on strategic military importance.

## • Commercial prosperity

From the Middle Ages through the 18th and 19th centuries, Pont-Saint-Esprit prospered thanks to tolls collected on the bridge and the transshipment of goods—especially salt and cereals—passing through its quays. The city became a thriving commercial crossroads where boatmen, traders and travelers converged.

## • Contemporary period

On August 15, 1944, during the Provence landings (Operation Dragoon), Allied forces bombed the bridges over the Rhône to slow the retreat of German armies. Nearly 130 American aircraft targeted the mariner's arch of the Pont du Saint-Esprit. Despite warnings from Radio London urging the population to evacuate, several inhabitants remained in place. Nineteen residents of Pont-Saint-Esprit lost their lives. Although the military target was hit, the bombings destroyed part of the quays and several neighbourhoods of the old town centre. A few years later, in August 1951, the town was the scene of a mysterious event known as “the cursed bread affair.” After consuming bread from a local bakery, dozens of residents experienced hallucinations, episodes of madness, and some hurled themselves from windows. The poisoning caused five deaths and made up to 300 people ill. While ergotism—caused by a hallucinogenic fungus contaminating cereals—was judged the most plausible hypothesis, other explanations were put forward: accidental poisoning, chemical pollution, or even experiments with psychotropic substances. In 2009 American journalist H.P. Albarelli even suggested the possibility of a secret CIA LSD test, a thesis that, without formal proof, still fuels the myth surrounding this affair today.

1



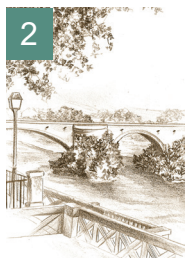
## COLLEGIATE CHURCH – CITADEL

**The Collegiate Church**, (Chapel of the Holy Spirit) was built between 1310 and 1326 by the confraternity of the Œuvre du Saint-Esprit, after authorization from Philippe le Bel, to accommodate the sick, the poor and abandoned children. Its chapel, erected as early as 1319, adopts northern Gothic: a single nave extended by a choir and a pentagonal apse, with a bay allowing patients to attend services.

Between 1475 and 1477, architect Blaise Lécuyer completed the nave and executed the flamboyant Gothic south portal, adorned with curled cabbage motifs- a masterpiece combining rigor and elegance. Listed as a historic monument in 1910, this portal is the main witness to the artistic and spiritual ambition of the place.

**The Citadel**, dominating the Rhône, was a major strategic point. After the city was seized by Protestants and then returned to Catholic hands, Governor Alphonse d'Ornano had a fortress built between 1585 and 1595. Under Louis XIII, between 1621 and 1627, Jean de Beins constructed a pentagonal citadel with bastions. Vauban later reinforced the defences in the 17th century. Gradually it lost its military function and fell into disuse in the 19th century. Occupied during World War II, it served as a prison: more than a thousand resistance fighters were detained there and several hundred were executed. Bombed in 1944, it was demolished in 1947. Today only a few remains survive, bearing witness to its strategic past and the conflicts that scarred it.

2

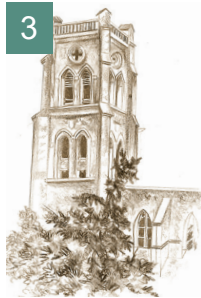


## BRIDGE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

**The Bridge of the Holy Spirit**, built between 1265 and 1309 by the confraternity of the Œuvre du Saint-Esprit, linked Languedoc to Provence. Measuring 919 meters long and originally composed of 26 arches, it was the longest medieval bridge known at the time. Built of limestone rubble, it displays semicircular or slightly pointed arches and piers with triangular cutwaters to resist the current. The bridge included oratories, a chapel, a toll tower and a prison.

In the 18th and 19th centuries it was widened, and two arches were replaced by a cast-iron navigation arch to allow river traffic. This arch was destroyed in 1944 during Allied bombings and then rebuilt in concrete in 1954. The bridge remains a major architectural and historical emblem of Pont-Saint-Esprit.

3



## SAINT-SATURNIN CHURCH

Overlooking Pont-Saint-Esprit, **the parish church of Saint-Saturnin** is dedicated to the first bishop of Toulouse, martyred in the 3rd century. Mentioned as early as 948 in Cluniac charters, it attests to an ancient establishment. Its Romanesque building underwent several campaigns of reconstruction: in the 12th and then in the 14th century, works extended until 1475-1485, notably with the completion of the nave and the creation of the large flamboyant Gothic portal by Blaise Lécuyer.

Set on fire in 1562 during the Wars of Religion, the church saw its nave and chapels collapse. Reconstruction progressed between the late 16th and early 17th centuries. The Revolution led to its pillage and its conversion into a barracks and military storehouse. Worship did not resume until 1826. The 19th century marked a renewal: between 1849 and 1865 new neo-Gothic chapels were erected under architect Fontanille. The bell tower, rebuilt in 1874 by Jean-Baptiste Hugon, reshaped the church's silhouette. The interior mixes medieval heritage and neo-Gothic decoration, notably in the Chapel of the Souls of Purgatory decorated by Léon Alègre. In August 1944, a bombing partially destroyed the Lourdes Chapel and several stained-glass windows, recently restored using traditional techniques. The church has been listed on the Supplementary Inventory of Historic Monuments since 2012, confirming the richness of its history and the value of its heritage.

4



## SAINT-PIERRE PRIORY

**The Saint-Pierre Priory**, founded in 948 by Géraud d'Uzès, is one of the oldest Cluniac foundations in the region, endowed with a vast agricultural estate and a prosperous conventual ensemble in the Middle Ages. Rebuilt around 1180 with a façade inspired by Antiquity, it was again modified between 1302 and 1308 in a Gothic style after floods and fires. Devastated by the Wars of Religion (1562-1567),

it then fell into ruin. An ambitious reconstruction project was launched in 1779, giving the building a rare Greek-cross plan in Languedoc and a central dome. Deconsecrated during the Revolution, it successively became a warehouse, parish church, school (which explains the presence of painted maps in the side chapels), military store and administrative offices. Its architecture blends Romanesque, Gothic and Neoclassical elements: a sober façade with a classical pediment, visible ancient walls, and a bell tower modified in the 17th century. Classified as a Historic

Monument in 1988, the Saint-Pierre Priory was restored between 2014 and 2016 and now hosts concerts and exhibitions.



5



## PENITENTS' STAGE-CHAPEL

Founded by the brotherhood of the Black Penitents in 1600, **the Saint John the Baptist chapel** began construction in 1647 and was completed in 1657. Intended for accompaniment of the dying and for charity, it adopts a simple single-nave plan, contrasted with a richly decorated façade influenced by Italian architecture coming from Avignon.

The monumental portal, Corinthian columns, festoons, the central niche adorned with volutes and the statue of Saint John the Baptist (added in 1898) mark this façade, attributed to engineer Dastet. Inside, the Baroque plasterwork bears witness to a restrained refinement, enriched in the 18th century. Seized during the Revolution, the chapel became a patriotic club before regaining its religious function in 1855. New fittings were carried out, notably a bell tower in 1840 and a balustrade with a statue of the Virgin in 1860. The brotherhood declined and disappeared between the two wars. From 1950 onwards the building was converted into a performance hall under the name "Salle Mistral", and in 2012 it became "La Scène", a lively cultural space. The façade was listed as a Historic Monument in 1939, followed by the listing of the whole ensemble in 2005.

6



## HOUSE OF HERITAGE

**The House of Heritage**, located on the former market square, was from the Middle Ages the seat of municipal power. Rebuilt in 1615 with a belfry dominating the town, it symbolized consular authority. In the 18th century, architect Rollin remodelled the façade in a balanced Neoclassical style. Faced with major structural disorders, the building was rebuilt in 1833 by architect Pralong, while preserving

the cellar, which houses a rare monumental icehouse built in 1779. In the 20th century the building housed various uses: music school, library, Paul-Raymond municipal museum (1978–2015), then the headquarters of the Programmed Operation for the Improvement of Housing. It was finally renamed House of Heritage, becoming a resource and activity centre dedicated to local heritage.

By its strategic situation and the richness of its remains, it testifies to the social and urban history of the town and embodies the living memory of the old centre.

A



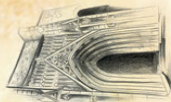
Hôtel de Ville  
et son parc

Jeux pour enfants

Jeux pour enfants

Parking gratuit  
du Champ de Mars

Citadelle  
Collégiale



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2

Le Pont  
du Saint-Esprit

1

Carrefour

de l'Europe

Avenue Pasteur

Rampe du Port

Rue

Rue

Rue

Rue

Rue

Rue

Rue

Rue

Rue

Rue

Rue

Rue

Rue

Rue

Rue

B

Le Rhône

Eglise  
Saint-Saturnin

3

Quai Albert de Luynes

Rue du Nord

Rue de la paroisse

Rue

Rue

Rue

Rue

Rue

Rue

Rue

Rue

Rue

Rue

Rue

12 Escalier St-Pierre

Prieuré  
St-Pierre

Temple

4

Place  
Saint-Pierre

5

Scène Chapelle  
des Pénitents

quatre vents

Rue des  
Pénitents

Imp  
St-Pierre

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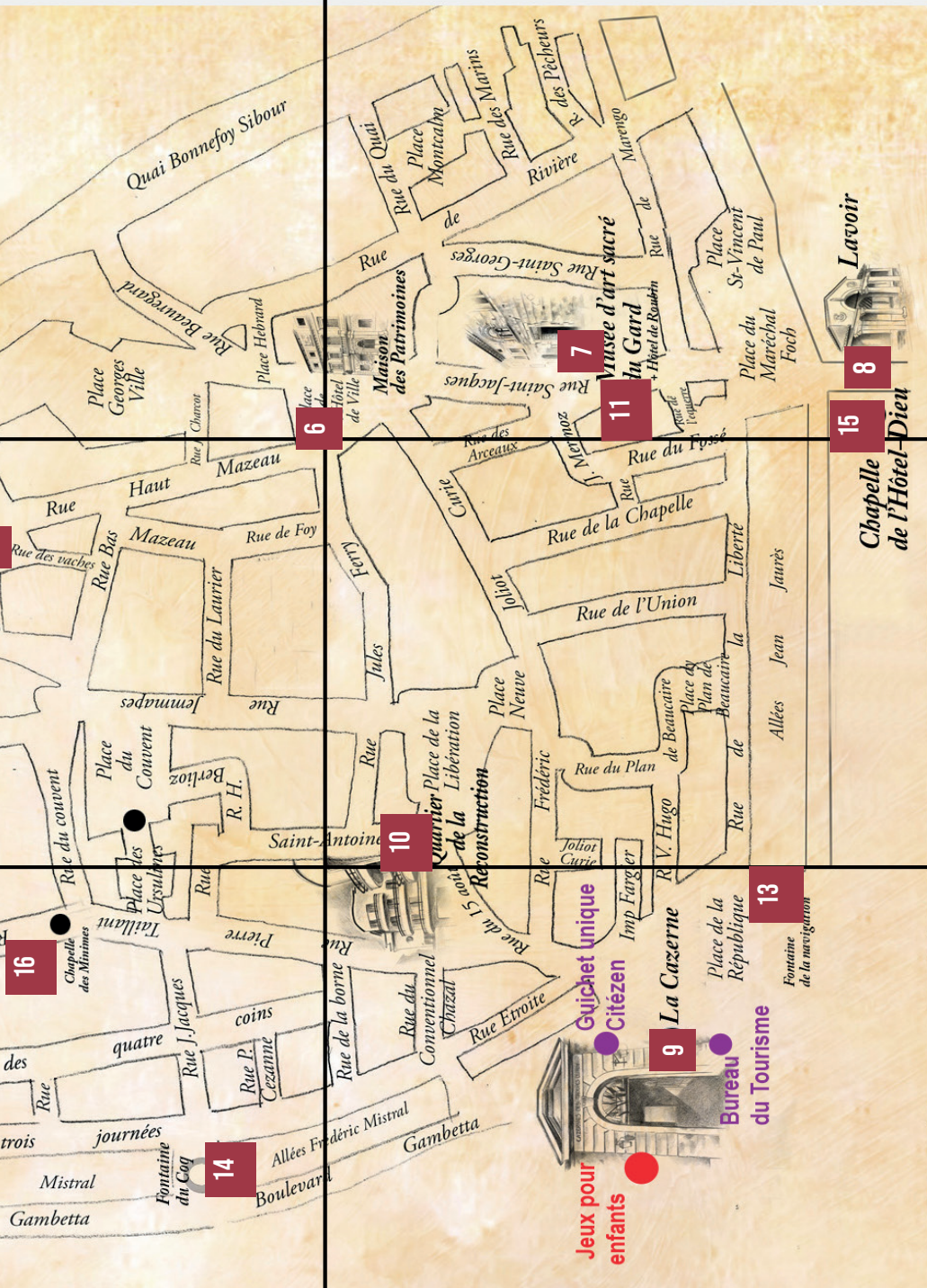
Rue

16



C





12



## SAINT-PIERRE STAIRCASE

**The monumental Saint-Pierre staircase**, built between 1840 and 1858, was part of a project to modernize the port's façade of Pont-Saint-Esprit on the Rhône. It connects the quays to the heart of the town. 75 meters long and more than 10 meters high, the staircase presents a symmetrical composition: two symmetrical flights leading to a large central landing supported by seven sculpted arches, with balustrades and stone handrails. Its decoration combines religious symbols (the theological virtues, the anchor of Hope, the pelican of Charity, the triangle for Faith and the Trinity, a fully set sail boat "fisher of men") and references to river activity (baskets of fruit, barrels, ducks), affirming the importance of the Rhône for the town. The style mixes Neo-classicism and Neo-gothic, evoking the great 19th-century developments. Bombed in 1944 and weakened by time, it was restored after its selection in 2019 by the Heritage Lottery (Loto du Patrimoine). It was a winner of the Rubans du Patrimoine competition in 2024. Today it remains a striking symbol of the town's urban architecture and its spiritual and economic heritage

7



## HOUSE OF THE KNIGHT

**The House of the Knights**, near the former market square of Pont-Saint-Esprit, is a rare example of an urban dwelling evolving from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance. Founded at the end of the 11th century as a fortified house with towers and a defensive dwelling, it was provided in the 12th century with a large hall (aula) adorned with rich Romanesque decorations, reflecting the status of its owner. At the end of the Middle Ages it belonged to the Piolenc family, wealthy merchants established in the 15th century, prospering through the trade of salt and cloth. Between 1540 and 1560 Pierre de Piolenc transformed the façade according to Renaissance canons: windows framed by Corinthian pilasters, carved cornice, family coat of arms. Interior fittings continued in the 17th century with monumental fireplaces and a French-style ceiling. Today the House of the Knights remains an exceptional testimony to the civil and commercial heritage of the Rhône valley. It houses the secular Museum of Sacred Art of Gard and was classified as a Historic Monument in 1992.



8



## THE HOUSE OF THE KNIGHTS, NEAR

**The municipal washhouse**, built in 1832 on the banks of the Rhône, is a remarkable witness to the hygienist urbanism of the 19th century. Designed by architect Pralong, it responded to the desire to improve hygiene and daily life for a growing population. The building, of a monumental appearance, consists of a central body with exposed gables pierced by Serlian windows and two lateral wings housing large basins. The façade is decorated with sculptures with marine motifs (dolphin, Neptune heads). The pillars and columns are monolithic and set in the direction of the bed. The peculiarity of the facing of the dwarf walls and the wedge-shaped voussoirs of the niche arches is that they are in glazed bricks rather than enamelled ones. A place of work and female sociability, the washhouse later fell into abandonment. Listed as a Historic Monument in 2005 (the only labelled washhouse in the Gard), it almost fell into ruin in 2011 after a beam broke.

An ambitious restoration carried out between 2012 and 2015, largely funded by the Regional Directorate of Cultural Affairs of Occitanie and the Heritage Foundation, earned it the Rubans du Patrimoine award in 2017.

9



## THE BARRACKS

Built between 1714 and 1719 to house troops, **the Pépin barracks** is an imposing military building designed by Cubizol, Thibou and engineer Dastet. It presents itself as a sober and functional quadrilateral around a large courtyard, with a monumental gate adorned with royal arms. For two centuries it hosted different regiments, including the Foreign Legion, and up to 926 men and 80 horses. After 1920 the departure of the garrisons began its military decline. From 1931 to 1944 the Republican Guard was stationed there. The building was not requisitioned during the Occupation. After the Liberation the barracks housed the French Forces of the Interior, the gendarmerie and civil services. In 1979 the departure of the gendarmes allowed its progressive conversion into the Centre Pépin, grouping associations, shops and municipal services.

Between 2011 and 2018, major renovations were carried out to modernize the building while respecting its historic character. Inaugurated in 2018, it reclaimed its original name in 2019: La Cazerne.

10



## NEW DISTRICT

**The new district** dates from the 20th century. These neighbourhoods were once made up of narrow lanes, old buildings and modest squares. On August 15, 1944, the allied aerial bombardment intended to destroy the bridges over the Rhône hit or destroyed 40 buildings and 254 apartments in this district, causing 19 deaths. The “reconstruction plan” launched in 1950 was inspired by the futuristic architectural style of the time. After

difficult years, the district, with its returning shops, has experienced a true revitalization.

11



## HÔTEL DE ROUBIN

**The Hôtel de Roubin**, located in the heart of Pont-Saint-Esprit's historic quarter, is an outstanding example of southern Mannerist architecture, built at the end of the 16th century and the beginning of the 17th. It was erected by a family of notables active in river trade, agriculture and seigneurial management, in a context of prosperity linked to the strategic role of the port on the Rhône. Its façade presents three levels. The ground floor is massive, pierced by

a semicircular arched doorway framed by rustic bossage and projecting voussoirs. The first floor, more ornate, features two large double-sash windows bordered with mouldings and topped by interrupted segmental pediments, characteristic of Mannerism. The second floor, plainer, highlights a central bay with a window under a broken segmental pediment resting on consoles. The cornice, with modillions, is decorated with a frieze mixing metopes, triglyphs and scrolls, underlining the stylistic transition between late Renaissance and nascent Baroque.

The Hôtel de Roubin was listed as a Historic Monument in 1938.

13



## THE NAVIGATION FOUNTAIN

**The Navigation Fountain**, erected in 1838 in Pont-Saint-Esprit at the initiative of Mayor Sébastien-Apollon Sibour, illustrates urban embellishment and the enhancement of river commerce in the 19th century. Designed by architect Gaston Bourdon and sculptor Paul-Hubert Colin, it presents a neo-Renaissance and neo-Classical style. At the centre of the octagonal basin, the fountain features a female statue embodying the allegory of Navigation, a symbol of mastery

of waterways and prosperity. According to local tradition, this figure—sometimes nicknamed “Diana”—would not be a mere allegory. It is said that the statue's face was modelled on someone close to the mayor behind the project: some mention his daughter, others his wife, or even his mistress.

The Navigation Fountain was listed on the Supplementary Inventory of Historic Monuments in 1946.

14



## THE ROOSTER FOUNTAIN

**The Rooster Fountain**, was built between 1838 and 1839 under Mayor Sébastien-Apollon Sibour and symbolizes the embellishment of the Allées Frédéric-Mistral, a new area dedicated to the annual fair. It comprises a circular stone basin, a central column bearing a cast-iron rooster on a globe, surrounded by four swans and spouts sculpted as turtle or fish heads, illustrating 19th-century animal iconography. The names of donors and the mayor appear on the pedestal. After years of interruption, the fountain was brought back into use, regaining its role and place at the heart of the town.

15



## HÔTEL-DIEU CHAPEL

**The Hôtel-Dieu**, founded in the 14th century, developed from 1633 outside the town walls with the installation of the Sisters of the Visitation. The construction of the convent and its chapel began in the 1630s, and the chapel was rebuilt in 1740 to be enlarged. Its Baroque decoration, executed by an Italian artist, bears witness to refinement. The Revolution led to the deconsecration of the convent, then in the 19th century the medieval hospital was transferred to these buildings. Major works were carried out from 1832, including the Neoclassical reconstruction of the chapel façade in 1850, blessed in 1851. The hospital complex, symbol of local social and religious history, has been listed as a Historic Monument since 2005. The interior layout dates from around 1766. On the small-coffered ceiling the dove of the Holy Spirit and portraits refer to Saint Francis de Sales, founder of the Order of the Visitation who visited Pont-Saint-Esprit in 1622. This chapel also houses a bas-relief representing the cult of bees (the “avettes”), a painting, and the Vow of Louis XIII.

16



## CHAPEL OF THE MINIMES

**The Chapel of the Minimes**, was founded in 1602 thanks to the donation of Gilles Magnis and his wife, who gave their house to establish the community. In 1608, in the context of the Counter-Reformation, they had their church built, which became a funerary sanctuary welcoming the burials of great noble families of Languedoc. The Revolution led to its closure and sale as national property. Nevertheless, it was reassigned to worship in 1826 as a chapel of assistance. Its façade, very sober, reflects the mendicant ideal of the Minimes: a simple composition centred on a discreetly ornamented portal and a semicircular window, expressing austerity and conventual rigor.



## ONE-STOP DESK AT THE TOWN HALL

La Cazerne. Entrance on Boulevard Gambetta  
Open Monday to Thursday  
from 8:30 to 17:30,  
Friday from 7:30 to 16:30  
and Saturday from 8:30 to 12:30

**Tel. 04 66 90 34 00**

## TOURIST OFFICE GARD RHODANIEN AGGLOMERATION

La Cazerne. Entrance on Boulevard Gambetta

### **From October to March :**

Monday to Friday: 9:00 to 12:30 and  
13:30 to 17:30 Saturday: 9:30 to 12:30

### **From April to September:**

Monday to Friday: 9:00 to 12:30 and  
13:30 to 18:00 Saturday: 9:30 to 12:30

**Tel . 04 66 39 44 45**



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## GUIDED TOURS

- Tours led by certified guide-lecturers
- Departure in front of the Town Hall gate, circuit of approximately 2 to 2 hours
- To find dates and times of the tours, consult the cultural program on the town's website



PSEMAVILLE

[WWW.PONTSAINTESPRIT.FR](http://WWW.PONTSAINTESPRIT.FR)

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