

“A Castle Made by Subtraction” - The Rock, the Ruin, and What Remains (75 minutes)

Best Time: The first hour after opening (9:00 AM from April through September) or the last two hours before closing, when the day-trip coaches have gone and the white stone stops glaring. Last entry is one hour before closing.

Bring: Shoes with real grip for worn rock-cut steps, water and a hat (the plateau has almost no shade), a wind layer on mistral days, and binoculars for the southern horizon.

Focus: Reading Les Baux as a place shaped by taking away rather than adding: a castle carved out of its rock, a fortress unmade at its own people's request, and the small hollow traces that outlasted both.

Track 0 • Welcome: How to Use This Tour

Hi, I'm Bill Pritchard, and this is The Attentive Traveler. Thank you for bringing me along to Les Baux-de-Provence. [PAUSE]

Before we start, a few words on how this tour works. It's divided into six sections, and each one is its own recording that begins at a particular spot: the car park below the village, the village street, the château gate, the open plateau, the rock-cut castle, and the top of the keep. When a section ends, pause the player and walk to the next spot at your own pace. You never need to hurry to keep up with me. [PAUSE]

Inside each section you'll hear numbered Detail Discoveries. These are small things worth finding with your own eyes, so when I describe one, stop and look for it. Pause me whenever you like; the stone has been there for a thousand years and will wait a little longer. When you hear me say Photo Opportunity, that's the spot where I found the picture worth taking. [PAUSE]

A few practical notes. Download these recordings before you leave your hotel, in case the signal up on the rock is weak. Wear one earbud rather than two, so you can still hear the people and traffic around you. And on the steep, worn steps up to the towers, stop listening and watch your footing. The story will wait for you at the top. [PAUSE]

The written version of this tour, with the full script, a checklist of details to hunt for, and the history behind it all, is on theattentivetraveler.com, alongside my long guide to Les Baux. [PAUSE]

All right. Let's begin where the rock begins.

The Tour

Listener edition. Each heading below matches a track on theattentivetraveler.com. Pause between tracks and walk to the next spot at your own pace.

Les Baux-de-Provence is a village of about twenty permanent residents in its upper streets that receives something like a million and a half visitors a year. [PAUSE] Most of them come for the view and leave with a photograph of a ruin. You are going to do something slower. [PAUSE] Nearly everything you will see today was made by removing something. The castle was not so much built on this rock as cut out of it. The walls were not lost to an enemy; they were taken down, with gunpowder and pickaxes, after the townspeople themselves asked for it. The ruling family died out, the population drained away, and what stayed behind is a set of absences you can still put your hand into: a nesting hole, a rope groove, a window with no house behind it. [PAUSE] Keep that one idea with you as we walk. At each stop, ask what was taken away here, and what the gap still tells you.

Track 1 · Section 1: The Approach - The Rock Before the Castle (8 minutes)

Begin in the car park below the village, before you climb. Turn and look up at the cliff. [PAUSE] This is the *bauc*, the Provençal word for a rocky spur, and it is the reason anything is here at all. The name of the place is simply a description of what you are looking at.

Detail Discovery 1: Where the Rock Ends and the Wall Begins Let your eye travel up the pale limestone until it reaches the tall slab of masonry standing against the sky. [PAUSE] Now try to find the exact line where natural rock stops and built wall starts. It is harder than it should be. The builders squared off the living rock, cut rooms into it, and laid dressed blocks of the same stone on top, so the castle reads as a continuation of the cliff. [PAUSE] Look also at the smooth, flat planes on some of the lower faces. Cliffs do not weather into planes like that. Those are cut surfaces. The hill was the quarry for its own fortress.

People have used this height for a very long time. The site has been occupied almost continuously since prehistory, and the first written mention of a stronghold here, the *Balcium Castrum*, comes from the tenth century. [PAUSE] Around 1030 a lord named Hugues became the first to call himself *des Baux*, taking the rock's name as his family's.

Detail Discovery 2: The Valley Called Hell Before you go up, look the other way, across the green hollow to the far slope where grey rock pushes through the pines in knuckles and overhangs. [PAUSE] This is the edge of the Val d'Enfer, the Valley of Hell. A long local tradition holds that these contorted formations fed Dante's imagination when he described the landscape of the Inferno. Treat it as tradition rather than documented fact, but look at the shapes and you will see why

the story stuck. [PAUSE] Two more subtractions happened over there. The quarry that is now the Carrières des Lumières opened in 1800 and closed in 1935, when steel and concrete undercut cut stone. And in 1821 the chemist Pierre Berthier identified a red ore in these hills and named it for the village: bauxite, the source of aluminium. The name of this tiny place is now spoken in mines on every continent.

Photo Opportunity: From the car park, frame the keep on its rock with the green scrub filling the lower third. [PAUSE] This is the honest view of Les Baux: more cliff than castle.

Track 2 · Section 2: The Village Street - A Title, Two Flags, and a Window Without a House (12 minutes)

Walk up into the village past the Maison du Roy, built in 1499 and now the tourist office. [PAUSE] The opening you have just used is recent. Until 1866 the only way in was the Porte d'Eyguières on the far side; the rampart here was pierced in the nineteenth century to let visitors arrive more easily. Even the front door of Les Baux is a hole someone cut.

Detail Discovery 3: The Marquis Who Is Eleven Look for a cream-coloured plaque on an old wall reading *Site historique Grimaldi de Monaco*, with a crowned shield of red and white lozenges. [PAUSE] In 1642 Louis XIII made Les Baux a marquisate and gave it to Honoré II of Monaco as thanks for expelling the Spanish garrison from his rock; Honoré's son Hercule carried the title. It has belonged to the heir to the Monegasque throne ever since. [PAUSE] So the current Marquis des Baux is Prince Jacques, born in 2014. In September 2026 he was symbolically handed the keys to the town, and his father announced that Monaco is acquiring a historic house on the old ramparts to restore. [PAUSE] Notice what kind of survival this is. The power is long gone. The Revolution abolished the privileges in 1790. What remains is a title, a plaque, and a pair of flags.

Find those flags as you climb. One is the red and white of Monaco. The other is red with a white, many-pointed star. [PAUSE] That star is the oldest boast in Provence. The lords of Baux claimed descent from Balthazar, one of the Magi, and took the Star of Bethlehem, sixteen rays in silver, as their arms. Their motto was *A l'asard Bautezar*: roughly, "to chance, Balthazar." A family that traced itself to a man who followed a star and trusted his luck.

Detail Discovery 4: Post Tenebras Lux On the Rue Neuve, opposite the Hôtel de Manville, look up at a Renaissance window standing by itself against the sky: fluted pilasters, a stone cross-mullion, a carved entablature, and nothing behind it. You can see cliff and cloud through the openings. [PAUSE] Read the inscription across the top: POST TENEBRAS LUX 1571. After darkness, light. This was the motto of Calvin's Reformation, and carving it over your window in 1571, in Catholic

Provence in the middle of the Wars of Religion, was a public declaration. [PAUSE] The Manville family across the street, who built their fine townhouse the same year, were Protestant too, and a tolerant baron let the Reformed community live here openly. The building behind this window may have served as their place of worship. [PAUSE] The house is gone. The statement of faith is the only part left standing. It is the clearest example in the village of what this tour is about.

Photo Opportunity: Stand below the window and shoot upward so the empty panes hold only sky. Late morning puts the inscription in clean raking light.

As you continue up through the lanes you will pass a weathered stone column carrying a thin iron cross, set between two dark cypresses with broken walls behind it. [PAUSE] Give it a moment. In a village that sells a great deal of lavender soap, it is one of the quiet corners.

Track 3 · Section 3: Through the Gate - Chapel, Hospital and Garden (10 minutes)

Pass the ticket desk and enter the château grounds. [PAUSE] The site covers five hectares, far more than the ruin you saw from below, and the first things you meet are not military at all.

Detail Discovery 5: The Weavers' Chapel On your left stands the Chapelle Saint-Blaise, twelfth century and Romanesque at its plainest: a rectangle of pitted stone, a round-arched door, a single round window above it, and a little bell-gable on the ridge. [PAUSE] It was the chapel of the brotherhood of weavers and wool-carders, whose patron was Saint Blaise. Run your eye over the façade and look for the rectangular outline in the masonry to the right of the door, a framed panel that has lost whatever it held. [PAUSE] A guild chapel tells you something a keep cannot: that this rock once supported trades, a wool economy, ordinary working confraternities. In the thirteenth century the population up here is said to have been in the thousands.

Detail Discovery 6: Jeanne de Quiqueran's Hospital Just beyond are the remains of the Quiqueran Hospital and the garden planted on its site. [PAUSE] It was founded in the sixteenth century, during the Wars of Religion, by the will of Jeanne de Quiqueran, wife of the governor of Les Baux. It ran on rents paid mostly in kind, in wheat, wine and oil, and it stayed open until 1787. In its last decades the records show it sheltering six poor people, six sick people, and one servant. [PAUSE] Thirteen people. That is the scale of charity on a rock with no spring and no well.

Walk slowly through the garden. The beds are edged with woven wattle in the medieval manner and planted with the plants of the surrounding garrigue: rosemary, thyme, santolina, with fruit trees trained above them and a timber

pergola for shade. [PAUSE] At the centre an octagonal stone basin holds a rough boulder with water running over it. Crush a rosemary tip between your fingers before you move on. [PAUSE] You are about to walk out onto bare limestone, and this is the last soft thing for a while.

Photo Opportunity: The octagonal fountain framed by pink valerian in late spring, with the plateau glimpsed through the gap in the trees behind it.

Track 4 • Section 4: The Plateau - Engines and the Horizon (15 minutes)

Step out of the garden onto the open plateau. The ground turns to white gravel and scraped rock, the wind finds you, and a tall timber arm rises ahead against the sky.

Detail Discovery 7: The Trebuchet Walk up to the great trebuchet. It stands seventeen metres high and was installed, with the other engines here, in 2007. [PAUSE] Look at the base rather than the arm. Those two large wooden wheels are treadwheels: men walked inside them, like the wheels of a quarry crane, to haul the arm down against its counterweight. The site calls this winding system unique among reconstructed trebuchets in Europe. In season the engines are demonstrated; ask at the entrance for the day's times. [PAUSE] Now consider the irony of where it stands. A trebuchet is a machine for breaking walls from outside. These are reconstructions placed inside the castle they would have attacked, and when Les Baux finally fell in 1632, it was in the age of gunpowder, not of slings. The engines are a kind of stage set for a siege that came in a different form.

Detail Discovery 8: The Ram Under Its Roof A few steps on, find the battering ram: a tree trunk hung on chains inside a steep, A-shaped timber shelter. [PAUSE] Crouch and look along the log. The roof is the interesting part. A crew swinging a ram at a gate stood directly under defenders dropping stones and fire, so the machine is mostly armour: a walking shed with a weapon inside it. [PAUSE] From underneath, the keep appears on its rock through the far opening, which is exactly the view its crew would have wanted and feared.

Now walk south, away from the castle, along the path that runs down the spine of the plateau to its far end. The rock underfoot is scored and polished. Go as far as the railing.

Detail Discovery 9: The Seventy-Nine Towns Stop at the southern edge and look out. [PAUSE] Below you olive groves run in grey-green rows between vineyards and dark lines of cypress planted as windbreaks against the mistral. To the left the jagged crest of the Alpilles. Beyond, the land flattens toward the Crau and the Camargue, and on a clear day the official line is that you can pick out Mont Sainte-Victoire far to the east. [PAUSE] At their height the lords of Baux held seventy-nine towns and strongholds, the *terres Baussenques*. They fought the

counts of Barcelona for Provence itself in three short wars between 1144 and 1162, and lost. Two centuries later Raymond de Turenne, lord here from 1386, made himself so feared in his rebellion that he was condemned, excommunicated, and remembered as the Scourge of Provence. [PAUSE] Stand here and you understand them. From this edge the whole country looks like something you could own. [PAUSE] And you also understand why every ruler of Provence, and finally the king of France, wanted this rock silenced.

Photo Opportunity: From the southern railing, the quilt of olives and vines with the Alpilles ridge on the left. Midday flattens it; early or late light gives the cypress rows their shadows.

Track 5 • Section 5: The Rock-Cut Castle - Rooms Without Walls (20 minutes)

Turn back north and walk toward the castle along the foot of the cliff, on the broad gravel court. The rock face rises on your right, the keep stands ahead on its crag, and the cliff is full of openings. [PAUSE] This was the outer courtyard, where craftsmen, peasants, the shepherd and the animals lived, separated by a ditch from the lord's court above.

Detail Discovery 10: Houses Carved, Not Built Step into one of the rock-cut rooms of the quarter called the Baume de Roucas, recorded in the land registers of the sixteenth century. [PAUSE] Look at how the surfaces are pitted and scalloped where the soft stone has weathered, and then look for what is too regular to be weather: a shelf cut into the wall, a fireplace hollowed out with its flue, small stone knobs left standing proud for hanging tools or drying hams. [PAUSE] To make a house here you did not bring material. You took it away, and you kept the stone for someone else's wall. Every room is a block-shaped absence.

Detail Discovery 11: Two Thousand Nests and One Pillory Further along, look up at the cliff face for a grid of small square holes, row upon row, like a stone honeycomb. [PAUSE] This is the dovecote. Each hole is a *boulin*, a nesting place for one pair of pigeons, and there was room for as many as two thousand. Pigeons meant meat and messages, and the right to keep them was a privilege of lordship, abolished at the Revolution. [PAUSE] In front of it stands a reconstructed wooden pillory. Put the two together: the lord's birds housed in the wall above, the lord's justice displayed on the ground below. Privilege and punishment in a single glance.

Detail Discovery 12: The Rope Marks Find the cistern, a barrel-vaulted chamber with two openings. [PAUSE] This rock has no spring. Every drop the castle drank fell as rain and was channelled into three cisterns lined with a waterproof mix of crushed terracotta, sand and lime. Look at the rim of the opening for grooves worn into the stone. Those were cut by nothing but rope, by

buckets drawn up day after day for centuries. [PAUSE] Of all the traces here this may be the most human. Nobody planned it. It is simply what thirst leaves behind.

Detail Discovery 13: The Saracen Tower and the Keep Now climb to the Tour Sarrasine, the tower that closed the castle's southern side and guarded the Auro gate, with false doors built to send attackers the wrong way. [PAUSE] A sign warns that the way up is difficult, and it is: the steps are cut from the rock and worn into soft, uneven dishes by centuries of feet. Go slowly, use the rail, and look down at your own shoes on the treads. Each hollow is another subtraction, made one footstep at a time. [PAUSE] From the top, turn north. The whole castle is laid out for you: the siege engines small on their white court, the lavender beds, the honeycombed cliff, and above it all the keep.

The keep is the castle's most imposing survivor, thirty-five metres long and twelve wide. On the valley side the builders cut the rock back to a height of up to twenty metres before a single block was laid, so the lower walls are the hill itself. [PAUSE] In its great chamber, in 1426, Alix des Baux died, the last of her line. With her the family that had held this rock for four hundred years came to an end. Within sixty years Les Baux, with the rest of Provence, belonged to the kingdom of France.

Photo Opportunity: From the Tour Sarrasine looking north: keep at upper right with its flag, siege engines at centre, the rocky Alpilles behind. This is the signature view of the site.

Track 6 · Section 6: The Summit and the Unmaking (10 minutes)

Make the last climb, to the top of the keep. Hold the rail; the wind is strongest here. [PAUSE] Look south first, the way you came: the plateau stretches away like the deck of a ship, with the trebuchet and the ram's shelter reduced to toys and the plain fading to haze. Then look down to the west, onto the terracotta roofs of the village packed against the rock, and across to the Val d'Enfer. At the north-west corner stands the Tour Paravelle, watching the Col de la Vayède, the high ground from which a besieger would come.

And one did. [PAUSE] In 1631, rebels who had risen for Gaston d'Orléans against his brother Louis XIII took refuge in Les Baux. Cardinal Richelieu ordered the place besieged. It held for twenty-seven days and fell in 1632. [PAUSE] What happened next is the fact to carry down the hill with you. The inhabitants themselves asked for the ramparts to be dismantled. They had lived for generations inside a fortress that drew every quarrel in Provence to their doors, and they had had enough. The high walls were brought down with powder and pickaxe. [PAUSE] The castle that could not be taken was taken apart, and the people who lived in its shadow asked for it.

Track 7 · Departure Meditation

Departure Meditation: Before you descend, find a place out of the wind and stand still. [PAUSE] Count what is missing. The walls, pulled down. The dynasty, ended in the room beneath your feet. The thousands who lived here, reduced to about twenty. The house behind the window on the Rue Neuve. The pigeons. The water. [PAUSE] Now count what the missing things left. A grid of nesting holes. A groove in a cistern rim. A row of steps worn into bowls. Three Latin words over an empty frame. A title held by a boy in Monaco. The name of a metal. [PAUSE]

We usually think of ruins as what is left of something. Les Baux suggests another way of seeing it: that a place can be defined as much by what was removed as by what was raised, and that the removals can be the more eloquent record. [PAUSE] A carved room tells you the exact size of the life that fitted inside it. A worn step tells you how many came this way. [PAUSE] Take a last look at the horizon, the one the lords of Baux looked at and wanted, and then go down slowly. The steps have been waiting a long time for one more pair of feet.

Our walk through Les Baux has followed a single thread from the car park to the top of the keep: a rock quarried into a castle, a castle unmade by its own town, and a village whose name travelled the world on a red ore while its streets emptied. [PAUSE] What is left is small and specific, and that is its strength. Les Baux does not ask you to imagine a lost splendour so much as to notice the shape of each thing that is gone.

Key Details to Hunt For

- **The seam between rock and masonry** on the keep, seen from the car park
- **Flat quarried planes** on the lower cliff faces
- **The Grimaldi plaque** with its red-and-white lozenge shield
- **The sixteen-rayed star** on the red flag of Les Baux
- **POST TENEBRAS LUX 1571** on the free-standing window, Rue Neuve
- **The empty framed panel** on the façade of the Chapelle Saint-Blaise
- **Wattle-edged beds** and the octagonal fountain in the Quiqueran garden
- **Twin treadwheels** at the base of the trebuchet
- **The armoured A-frame roof** over the battering ram
- **Carved shelves, fireplaces and hanging knobs** in the troglodyte houses
- **The boulins** of the rock-cut dovecote, up to two thousand of them
- **Rope grooves** on the cistern rim
- **Dished, worn steps** on the climb to the Tour Sarrasine

Photo Opportunities

- **Car park view** of the keep on its rock (more cliff than castle)
- **Post Tenebras Lux window** from below, panes filled with sky
- **Chapelle Saint-Blaise façade** against a deep blue sky
- **Quiqueran fountain** with valerian in bloom
- **Trebuchet** from the gravel path, full height against cloud
- **Battering ram** shot through its shelter toward the keep
- **Southern railing panorama** of olives, vines and the Alpilles
- **Dovecote and pillory** together in one frame
- **Tour Sarrasine view north** to the keep (signature shot)
- **Top of the keep** looking south along the plateau, and west over the village roofs
- **Your own feet** on the worn rock steps

Cultural Conversation Starters

- Ask staff when the siege engines are next demonstrated, and how the treadwheel winding works
- Ask about “Alix,” the QR-code guide that has replaced the old audioguide on site
- Ask in the village what the Monaco connection means day to day, and about the house the Principality is restoring
- Ask about the Christmas Eve midnight mass at Saint-Vincent, when shepherds still come to the church with their animals
- Ask a local producer what distinguishes Vallée des Baux olive oil
- Ask whether anyone still believes the Dante story about the Val d'Enfer
- Ask how many people actually sleep in the upper village in January

Historical Context

The rock of Les Baux has been occupied since prehistory; a *Balcium Castrum* is recorded in the tenth century, and around 1030 Hugues became the first lord to take the name des Baux. Claiming descent from the Magus Balthazar, the family came to hold seventy-nine towns and strongholds and contested the County of Provence in the Baussenque Wars (1144-1162). The line ended with Alix des Baux in 1426; the lordship passed to René of Anjou and, in 1481, with Provence to the French crown. A sixteenth-century revival under Anne de Montmorency brought Renaissance building, and from the 1570s the Manville family made the town a

Protestant centre. After rebels took refuge here in 1631, Richelieu had Les Baux besieged; it fell in 1632 after twenty-seven days and its walls were demolished at the inhabitants' request. In 1642 Louis XIII created the Marquisate of Les Baux for the Grimaldi of Monaco, whose heir still bears the title. Bauxite was identified nearby in 1821. Prosper Mérimée initiated the first restoration work in the nineteenth century, and the opening of the restaurant L'Oustau de Baumanière in 1945 began the village's modern fame. The château is a listed Historic Monument, now managed by the town's own tourism body.