

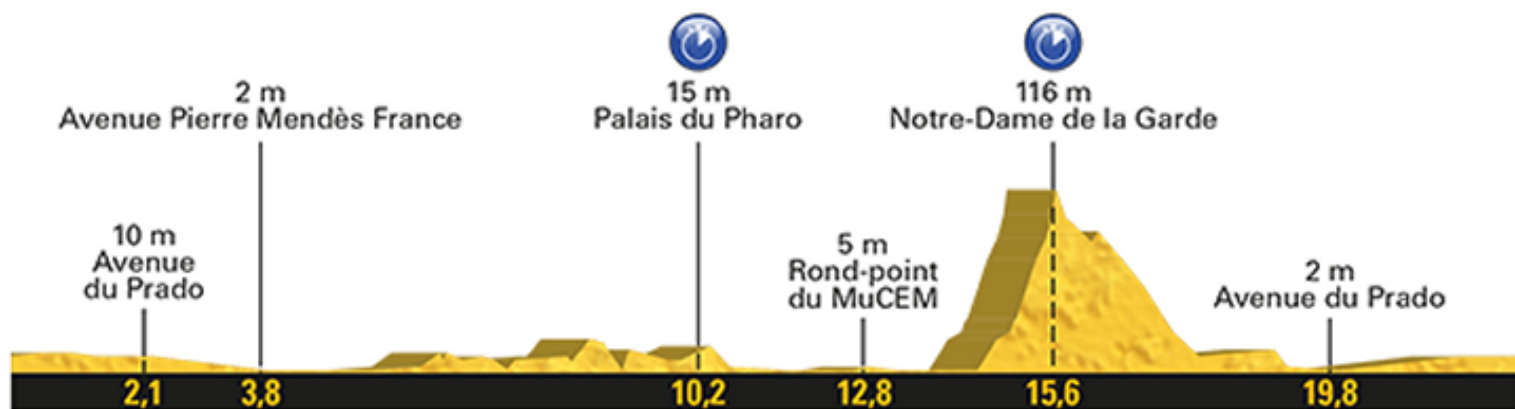
Orange Vélodrome

11 m



Orange Vélodrome

11 m



BOUCHES-DU-RHÔNE

0

22,5 km





France as a whole was significant to the Roman Empire, but was not founded by them. The Greeks founded Massalia in 600 B.C., but the city quickly became autonomous and self governing. That right was lost in 49 B.C. during Caesar's Civil War, and the area was incorporated in the Roman Empire. Marseille was considered remote enough, yet civilized enough, for early Christians to flee here during the early age of persecution. Today is the Feast of St. Mary Magdalen in the Latin Church. She, her sister Martha, and brother Lazarus sailed to France, to escape martyrdom, and other Christians followed soon afterward. The city of Lyons had enough Christians in the mid-100s, that a Bishop was sent there, who was martyred, and he was replaced by the great apologist of the patristic age, St. Irenaeus of Lyons, who had worked as his secretary. All of this early activity meant that the Church was well established in France within its first decades, and would later be called, for this reason "the eldest daughter of the Church."

St. Martha settled at Tarascon in Provence, and calmed the nearby beast the Tarasque, calming it and leading it into the city with her belt. When I was visiting Provence, once, for the Tour, I parked in a village, Tarascon, on the stage route, and stopped in the Church. Imagine my surprise to find, there, the tomb of a Biblical figure. No monsters, though. I went up onto the bridge over the Rhone, I think it was, and waited for the stage, almost interfering as the wind caught the Peloton as it curved onto the bridged, and sent it hard in my direction. I had precious little time to hoist myself onto a barrier, my arm on a light pole, as the peloton sped by inches from my knees, and about a yard under my camera. Although I loved film and my SLR, that system did not afford quite so many photos, so that is a happy memory of mine, if not of Memorex. I have unearthed no proof that Mary Magdalen lived and died near the Col de la Madeleine, although named for her. There is a young, in Church years, monastery at Le Barroux named for Mary. I am not sure if they speculate that she lived there, but as they gaze up at Mt. Ventoux from far down the valley, they can certainly contemplate otherworldliness, as she was fond of doing.

I was first in Marseille in the early 1990s, during a hard economic time for the city. Marseille has always been the main connection for mainland France with colonies and former colonies in Africa, and so is filled with hustle and bustle, industry, shipping. I like to stay positive, but at that time things were really run down, especially in the Old Port area. I had never really been in a European city and felt at risk of being mugged, but at that time, a little over 20 years ago, I sure did "watch my back." Today, with the help of cultural investment funds from the European Union, the Old Port area has been completely revitalized. There always have been, and still are, other beautiful sites in Marseille, from pristine beaches, to beautiful Churches and civic structures. I mentioned Notre Dame de la Garde yesterday, and its thousands of thanksgiving plaques, left in thanksgiving from surviving sailors over the millennia. It stands about as high above a city as possible, and is visible from everywhere, as it presides, beautifully, over day to day Marseille activities.

Unlike any other European city, perhaps, Marseille, while remaining indubitably French, is also quite multicultural. Marseille is France's second city, and its burgeoning population is made up, historically and today, of refugees, former colonists, and people who want to live in Provence but in a lively city. I might cite religion as an example (what a surprise, right?). Between 60-70 per cent of the population is at least nominally Catholic, and about a third at least nominally Muslim, and extremely large communities of Jews and Armenian Apostolic Christians, in addition to much smaller groups of indistinguishable Protestants, Eastern Orthodox, Hindus and Buddhists. Much like in other multicultural cities, it appears that Christmas is celebrated by all present and accounted for, with special foods, and the Santon market, which begins in November. Santons are special local figures which make up the Provencal Nativity scenes, which are collected by Marseillan families by the dozens.

Novelist and filmmaker Marcel Pagnol was from Marseille. Maurice Druon said of him "Pagnol is powerfully French, powerfully from Provence, powerfully Mediterranean, and that was the very distinctiveness of what he could bring to others. You are universal for what you bring to others. With talent or genius; well, he had both."

Marseille is also well known for hip-hop music, Tarot cards, and opera. Think of any massive, sun washed coastal city and add culture and baguettes. Because France. Marcel Pagnol famously said "One has to look out for penguins - they begin with sewing machines and end up with the atomic bomb." No, wait, he said that about engineers. Well, in our case, same difference.

Enjoy the Tour. Enjoy the day.

