

The Chapels of Vence

Sacred Art Itinerary

Land of welcome and cultural exchanges, Vence whose diocese was the smallest of the French kingdom, was known to have an important Christian presence. The bishops, the Saints and even a Pope wrote down the history of this town that remained Catholic throughout the religious wars. Seventy bishops succeeded each other from 374 to 1801. Today, you can still observe a number of chapels that form a wonderful Sacred Art itinerary passed down throughout the centuries by the Sacred Art builders.

Vence and its chapels : suggested itinerary

When leaving the Tourist Office, take the rue Henri Isnard up to the Place Frédéric Mistral where you will find the “**Chapelle des Pénitents Blancs**” blessed by Saint Agathe and located on the ancient Roman Path.

The primitive building included an apse and a small rectangular nave. In the 16th century, the Mercy friary settled down and later on took the name of the “Pénitents Blancs” (White Penitents) in 1560. Its role was humanitarian towards poverty, sickness and death. In the 17th century, the edifice was enlarged to resemble the one existing today. Then, were added on a sacristy, a four windowed dome and a small bell. The architectural originality of this chapel resides in its remarkable bell tower dome made of polychromatic tiles. Renovated in 1994, it is today a place of temporary art exhibitions.



The “Chapelle des Pénitents Blancs”

Keep going down the avenue Henri Isnard onto the avenue des Poilus up to the intersection Jean Moulin. In front of you, is a fountain out of which runs the spring water of the Foux. Take the avenue Henri Giraud going up approximately 100 m. On the corner of the avenue des Alliés, is a garage which was once one of the oldest chapels of the city, dedicated to Saint Crépin, the Saint Patron of the leather craftsmen.

You can have a glimpse of fresco traces in this little monument and a well preserved stucco baroque altarpiece and on the floor multicolored varnished tiles.

Keep going on the avenue des Alliés, a bit further on your left is a recent chapel “**Notre Dame des Missions**”. At the end of the avenue, turn left onto the avenue Foch, cross the bridge and turn right on the chemin des Tennis, walk aside the school and turn left and walk up the chemin du Calvaire. In 1720, Canon Honoré Blanc built the biggest of the 10 little chapels, each one retracing a stop of the Christ’s Calvary. Only five are still visible today.

On your left, a first chapel known as the highest, the next one on the same side is baptized “**Notre Dame de Larrat**”. It is dedicated to the Virgin Mary, and the date of its construction is still unknown. It was inaugurated in 1701, and was there before the “**Chapelles du Calvaire**”. It is inseparable of the priory which is attached to it and shows the importance of this place of worship till the beginning of the 20th century.

Going down this street, you can see on your right 4 little chapels built close to each other. Most of them have been left as is, but you can still see some mural paintings. This Calvary was destroyed during the French Revolution in 1789 and restored in 1810. Treasure of this Calvary : a collection of wooden polychromatic 17th century statues which are a unique example of popular Sacred Art in Provence. You may see them during the Summer in the Cathedral, “**Notre Dame de la Nativité**” in the old town.

Go down the chemin du Calvaire, and at the intersection, keep walking down boulevard Emmanuel Maurel on your right up to another chapel – that of “**Notre Dame de la Pitié**”, commonly known as the “**Chapelle Sainte Anne**”. Inside, you can still see the remains of the lapidary museum, that were formerly shown at the place du Frêne (the ash tree square). That chapel was edified upon a request of Bishop Pierre du Vair of Vence, and was dedicated to “**Notre Dame des Douleurs**” (Our Mother of all Pains). In front of the entrance of the chapel, you can see an important Christ on the Cross.



The “Chapelle Sainte Anne”

Consecrated in 1617, its purpose was to shelter the family mothers of Vence. To the original rectangular room were added two chapels representing a cross. The one on the left is dedicated to Saint Joseph, and the one on the right to Sainte Anne. In the chancel, there is an altarpiece dating from 1700. It is composed of splined columns on which you can see some painted and sculpted scenes. The walled bell tower and the stained glasses date from 1871. A mass is celebrated every July 26th, followed by a neighborhood block party. This is where our tour ends.

NB : if you wish to return to the town center, go down the chemin Sainte Anne on your left. Cross the avenue Emile Hugues and take the stairs on your right. Go back up to the rue du Pavillon and take the rue Marie-Antoinette on your left, you are now at the avenue de la Résistance, turn right and go up to the place du Grand Jardin.

“Chapelle Sainte Elisabeth ”

Departure from Place du Grand Jardin. Take the avenue Marcellin Maurel to the end, in front of the “**Basse Fontaine**”, turn right and walk down the avenue Colonel Meyère. On your left, is a rest home where used to be two chapels : “**Sainte Bernadette**” and the “**Chapelle des Pénitents Noirs**”, destroyed in the beginning of the 20th century.

Continue the avenue on your left up to the fountain and take the small path on your left Chemin du Camp, right after the fountain is the “**Chapelle Saint Pons**” which dates most likely from the 16th century. It was dedicated to the Saint of the muleteers, the breeders and cowherds.

Go back on the main road and follow it down to the chemin de la Pouraque. Further down this road, you will get to the “**Chapelle Sainte Elisabeth**” set on a small hillock. Dating from the 14th century, it has a Roman style. The frescoes by Jacques Canavesi (itinerant painter from Turin) decorating the vault are from the 15th century also illustrate Hell. The bell tower made with polychromatic tiles was inspired by that of the “**Chapelle des Pénitents Blancs**” and dates from the 19th century. The people of Vence made Sainte Elisabeth the protectress of their land. Now, a mass is celebrated on the first Monday of the first week-end of August.



The “Chapelle Sainte Elisabeth”

Also to see :

The town has two other chapels that are further away from the center.

- **The “Chapelle Sainte Colombe”** : dedicated to a Spanish virgin dead at Cordoba, is one of the oldest chapels of Vence. It is mentioned in the archives dating from the 12th century. Built close to the Julia Augusta Ancient Roman Path (from Cimiez to Auribeau), on the edge of the Medieval path leading to Saint Jeannet. The exterior architecture of this chapel is very simple (the polychromatic tiled bell tower was later added on in the 17th century) and was surrounded by farmlands and a farm. Put all together they formed a priory where itinerant travelers could stay overnight. Today, the association of the Friends of this chapel have renovated this edifice. Each year, for the Day of the “Sainte Colombe” a mass is held and followed by a church bazaar that takes place in the surrounding fields.

- **The “Chapelle Saint Lambert”** : built close to the place where legend has it that Saint Lambert, the Bishop of Vence (from 1114 to 1154) and the town Saint Patron enjoyed to come to meditate and pray beside a spring that was known to be miraculous. This chapel is the most recent rural chapel that was inaugurated in 1881. Born from the devotion of the townspeople to their Saint Patron, it was built by all types of volunteer craftsmen. Today it has been renovated by an association and a mass is held every May 26th, followed by a neighborhood block party.

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Opening hours

January - February & November - December

From Monday to Saturday : 9am-5pm

From March to June & September - October

From Monday to Saturday : 9am-6pm

July & August

From Monday to Saturday : 9am-7pm - Sunday 10am-6pm

