

# Destination Provence & Côte d'Azur

Scented hillsides, ancient villages, Europe's biggest canyon, exotic gardens and the Mediterranean are on the itinerary as **CARMEN KONOPKA** explores this lovely south-eastern part of France



Villa Ephrussi







**F**ragrance pervades Provence and the Côte d'Azur. In the early part of the year gardens are heavy with the honeyed scent of laurustinus bushes, mimosa and jasmine, then a little later with roses and lavender. Aromatic herbs like rosemary and thyme cling to the hillsides and find footholds everywhere in the tiniest pockets of soil. Market stalls are redolent of locally grown olives, garlic and tomatoes and truffles.

It's a heady mix that takes your senses by surprise. Travelling in Europe you often see remarkable sights, taste fantastic food and hear memorable music, but smells are usually fleeting – and not always nice! Yet here in this sun-baked corner of south-eastern France you find yourself luxuriating in perfume.

The world's perfume capital, Grasse, is in the east of the region. Here tonnes of jasmine are harvested every year and it's the home of traditional perfume houses like Fragonard, Molinard and Galimard. On the Plateau de Valensole, where fields are filled with rows of lavender as far as the eye can see, is the base of L'Occitane, the much newer but world-famous beauty products manufacturer.

Of course perfume is not the only attraction. The region – Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur to give it its full, lengthy name – has a wonderfully varied landscape, with the mountains of the Alpes-de-Haute-Provence and Alpes-Maritimes *départements*, the great valleys of the Rhône, Durance and Verdon rivers, Europe's largest delta in the Camargue, and the spectacular Mediterranean coastline with its combination of rocky heights and sandy beaches.

Artists have always loved this part of France, flocking here to capture the special luminescent quality of the light and the brilliant colours. Picasso, Matisse, Chagall, Bonard, Renoir, Van Gogh, Cézanne... the list of artists who have worked here reads like a museum catalogue. Luckily for us, many of them left work here – sometimes created on the walls of buildings, sometimes pictures which have since been gathered into excellent museum collections.

Historically Provence is fascinating too, and you'll find traces of previous civilisations dating right back to Palaeolithic times. Both the ancient Greeks and Romans came here and there are extraordinary remains of their presence, including the amphitheatre in Arles, the triumphal arch in Orange and the Trophée des Alpes in La Turbie, a massive monument built in 6BC.

It was the Romans who named this region, calling it *Provincia Nostra*, 'our province', which eventually evolved into Provence. It's now a large region, covering the six *départements* of Vaucluse, Bouches du Rhône, Hautes-Alpes, Var, Alpes-de-Hautes-Provence and Alpes-Maritimes – too much for one journey, so in this feature we travel through only the last three and we will explore Vaucluse in the next issue of *Destination France*.

I started this journey in Aix-en-Provence, then

followed the Durance river valley northwards to the pretty mountain towns and villages around Forcalquier before heading east to visit the Gorge du Verdon, a 25km long canyon, up to 700m deep in parts. Nearby I visited Moustiers-Sainte-Marie, a town perched on the edge of a ravine, which is famous for its *faïence* ceramic workshops.

Heading south, I stopped at the ancient Thoronet Abbey, built by the Cistercians in 1175, and the basilica in Saint Maximin with its tomb of Mary Magdalen, before visiting a vineyard established by the Templars near Flassans sur Issole.

My first stop on the coast was at Hyères which became Provence's first seaside resort when the French King Charles IX spent the winter there in 1564, and which grew to become a favourite of our own Queen Victoria and wealthy Brits in the 19th century. From here I followed the coast eastwards to Nice, exploring resorts, villages and gardens along what we call the Riviera and the French know better as the Côte d'Azur.

Much of Provence is deeply rural and every town has a market overflowing with local produce. Until the 20th century many people still spoke Occitan (the *Langue d'Oc*, 'oc' being the word for 'yes') rather than French. Today the country accent is distinctive and you'll hear people saying '*bey oui*' rather than '*mais oui*', and they'll refer to what sounds like *vang* when they pour you a glass of the delicious local rosé.

By contrast, along the coast is a more glamorous world with the sophisticated resorts of Saint Tropez, Cannes, Juan-les-Pins and Nice, to mention just a few. Here you'll spot sublime villas in exquisite seafront locations, or tucked away secretly in the hills above. There are luxurious hotels and divine restaurants – not to mention sophisticated nightspots – that are the haunts of the rich and famous, along with plenty for those of us who are neither stars nor millionaires...

CLOCKWISE AROUND OPPOSITE PAGE:

◆ Lavender, one of the many fragrances of Provence

◆ Gorge du Verdon  
*(Picture: OT Moustiers)*

◆ Pine trees grow all along the Côte d'Azur

◆ Coastline at Rayol-Canadel in the Var

◆ One of the Picasso paintings on the painters' trail at Antibes

◆ St Martin de Brômes in Alpes-de-Haute-Provence

◆ Boats at Beaulieu

◆ Desperate Housewives star Eva Longoria Parker wearing an Emilio Pucci dress at this year's Cannes Film Festival  
*(Picture: Mike Marsland)*

## HOW TO GET THERE

I travelled to France by train, first taking the Eurostar from London to Lille, then a high-speed TGV train to Aix-en-Provence. For the return journey, I left from Nice. Return fares from London to Marseille and Nice start at £119 per person in standard class, subject to availability. For bookings visit [www.raileurope.co.uk](http://www.raileurope.co.uk) or call 0844 848 4070. Personal callers are welcome at the Rail Europe Travel Centre, 1 Regent Street, London SW1

## MORE INFO

[www.terre-mediterranee.com](http://www.terre-mediterranee.com)  
[www.frenchriviera-tourism.com](http://www.frenchriviera-tourism.com)  
[www.alpes-haute-provence.com](http://www.alpes-haute-provence.com)  
[www.visitvar.fr](http://www.visitvar.fr)



# PROVENCE & CÔTE D'AZUR

## HIGHSPTS AND PANORAMAS

**D**riving in Haut Provence and the Côte d'Azur is not for the faint-hearted. Expect steep climbs and hairpin bends on the mountain roads. Along the coast you can imagine yourself as glamorous Grace Kelly or Cary Grant in Hitchcock's *To Catch a Thief* as you zigzag along the famous *Grande Corniche*.

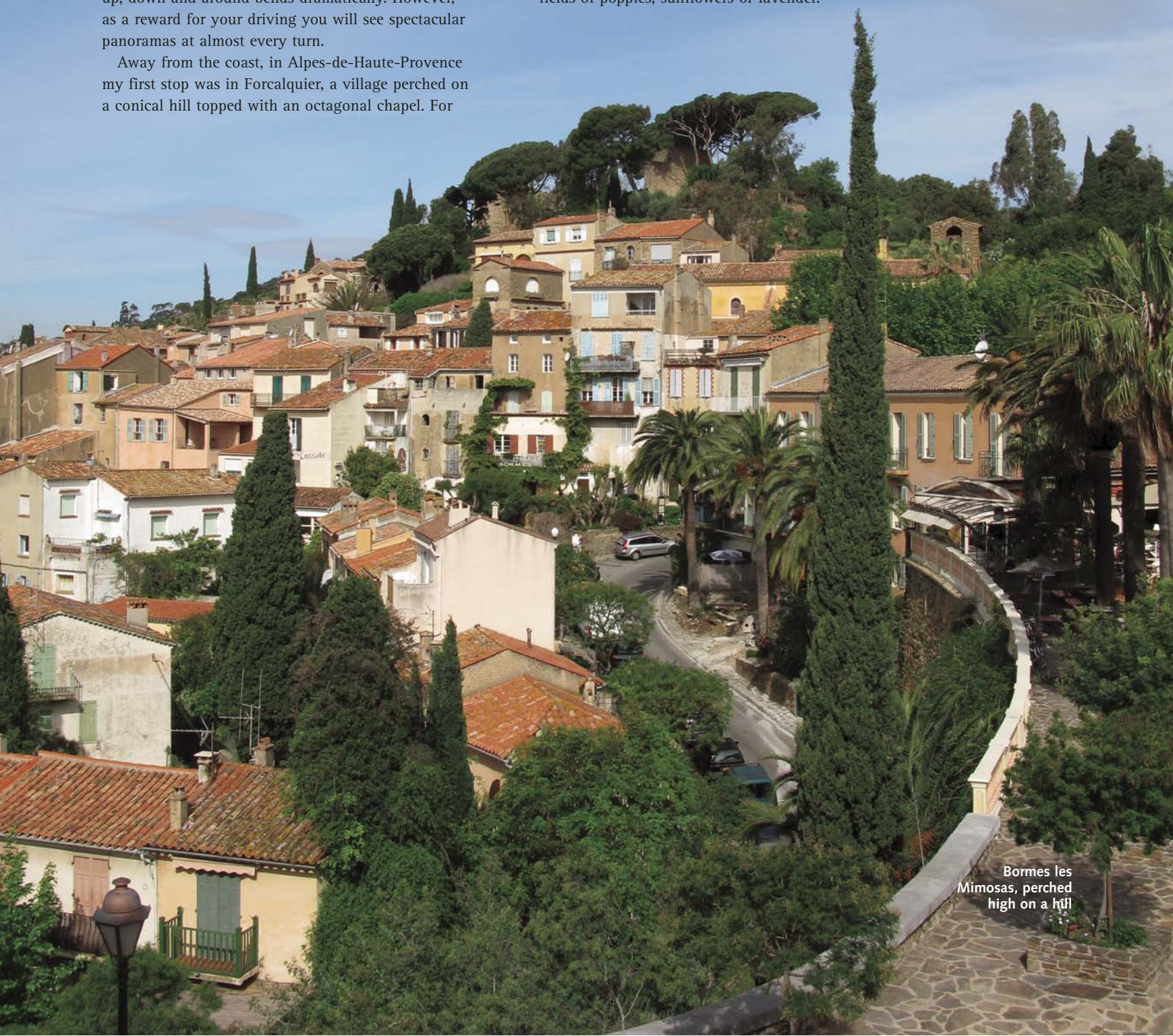
In fact there are three *corniches* between Nice and Menton – the *Grande* at the highest level, the *Inférieure* or *Bas* closest to the sea, and the *Moyenne* in between – and yet more along other parts of the coast. Literally *corniche* means 'road on a ledge' and often they go up, down and around bends dramatically. However, as a reward for your driving you will see spectacular panoramas at almost every turn.

Away from the coast, in Alpes-de-Haute-Provence my first stop was in Forcalquier, a village perched on a conical hill topped with an octagonal chapel. For

fantastic views of the surrounding countryside climb up the citadel tower – you can see across to the Alps, the Valensole Plateau and the Luberon. Glorious!

This area boasts some of the clearest skies in Europe, with the result that it is home to 13 astronomical observatories, among them the Observatoire de Haute-Provence, a national facility for French astronomers which can be visited by the public during the day.

The villages nearby are delightful to explore, among them Lurs, perched on a rocky spur above the Durance valley. Walk along the Promenade des Evêques to the Notre Dame de Vie chapel to see fabulous views of the olive groves all around and, depending on the season, fields of poppies, sunflowers or lavender.



Bormes les Mimosas, perched high on a hill



Heading east across the Plateau de Valensole is Moustiers-Sainte-Marie, a pretty little town so precariously positioned on a ledge at the base of a cliff that you wonder how they ever managed to build houses here. Its buildings are on either side of a fast-flowing waterfall that in days gone by powered 20 mills for flour, wood and pottery. Remarkably, Moustiers was one of the first places in France to have electric lighting, thanks to a hydroelectric plant installed in the late 19th century.

Today it's enchanting to explore the quaint narrow streets dating back to the 5th century. There are numerous potteries producing *faïence* – tin-glazed earthenware with its characteristic white finish and delicate hand-painted decorations – and many of the potters are happy for you to watch them at work. The biennial pottery festival takes place this year from September 25-October 3.

Look up and you'll see a great star suspended from a chain stretched between two cliffs above the town. Legend has it that the star was originally put there by the Chevalier de Blacas in thanks for his safe return after being captured by the Saracens in the Crusades.

Travel down the windy road south-east from Moustiers and you come to Pont de Galetas, a crossing over the Verdon river which marks the end of the extraordinary Gorge du Verdon where it flows into the great Lac de Sainte Croix. This is a perfect spot for those who want to swim, canoe, go white-water rafting, climb, walk... or simply enjoy the stunning views.

The immense Gorge du Verdon straddles the two *départements* of the Var and Alpes-de-Haute-Provence and is around 25km long. A canyon created by a geographical fault, it has gigantic limestone cliffs rearing up sharply on either side, in places up to 700m high. At the bottom flows the Verdon river which is such a bright turquoise that you wonder how such a colour can be natural.

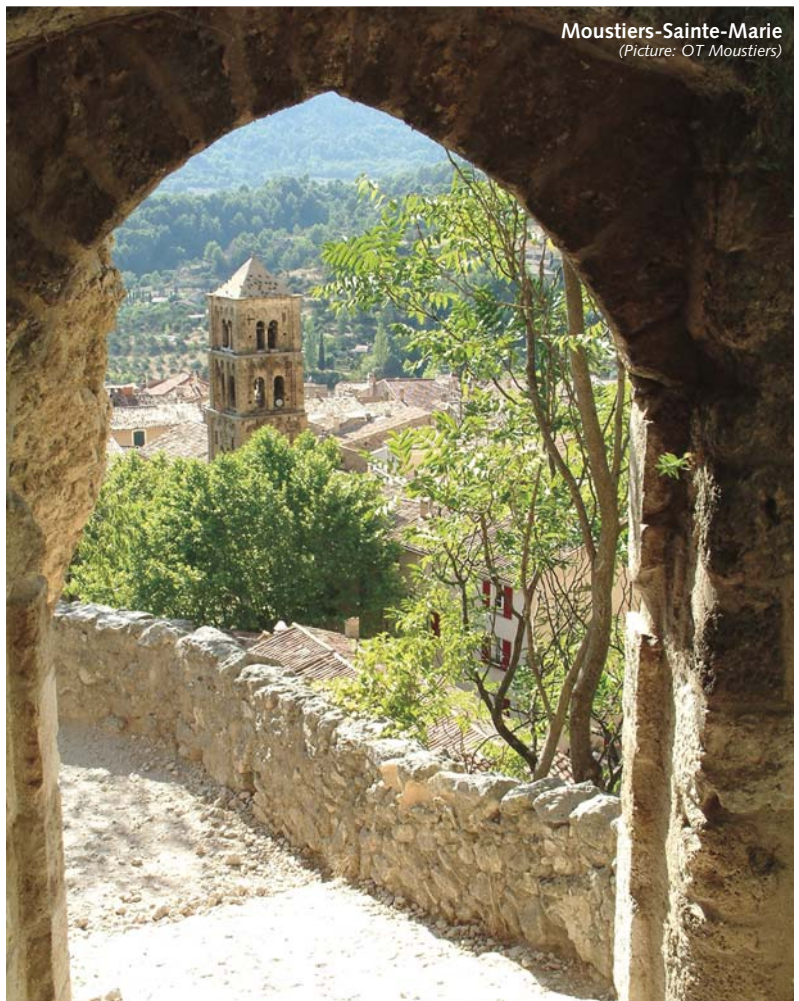
The rugged scenery of Europe's largest canyon and its rushing river is in stark contrast to the Lac de Sainte Croix which it feeds into. A man-made lake formed by the creation of a barrage in 1975, the lake is about 10km long and up to 3km at its widest. Its calm waters stretch out like a vast mirror. There are lots of beaches and boating activities and the lake is so large that even in the height of the summer it still feels spacious and uncrowded.

For views of a very different type I headed south to the Mediterranean sea and the resort of Hyères les Palmiers. Part of the Var *département*, this town lies at the junction of Provence and the Côte d'Azur. It was founded in medieval times, but really came into its own in the 19th century with the advent of the railway and the British upper classes, among them in 1892 Queen Victoria.

Nowadays you can still see streets filled with lovely Belle Epoque villas – here a Moorish residence, there



Moustiers-Sainte-Marie



Moustiers-Sainte-Marie  
(Picture: OT Moustiers)



Saltmarsh at Hyères



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an Art Deco mansion – many of them lined with the palm trees from which the town takes part of its name. In Avenue Beauregard is the old Anglican church that, apart from the palm trees at its side, looks like it has been transported from a London suburb. By 1953 most of its English congregation had gone, so it was bought by the town and converted into a cultural centre.

To see the high spots of Hyères you need to enter the medieval part of the town at Porte Massillon, then keep walking up... and up! You climb steep streets lined with market stalls and shops selling local produce – including lots of flowers because this is the centre of cut flower horticulture in France. The 12th century Tour des Templiers dominates a square filled with café tables, which is a good place to fortify yourself with a drink before heading onwards and upwards.

Follow the map from the tourist office to discover the small lanes that lead to the Maison Renaissance with its fairytale pointy-roofed tower and pause here to look out across the rooftops of the town. Out in the distance you can see the saltmarshes and beaches that stretch out on a narrow peninsula, and beyond them the islands of Porquerolles, Port-Cros and Levant.

Keep walking up rocky paths and steps until you reach the lovely Parc Sainte Claire whose terraces are filled with succulents, cactus and other exotic plants. Then continue upwards to the Villa Noailles, a severe but impressive modernist-style house designed by architect Mallet-Stevens in the late 1920s. The surrounding garden is formal to complement the style of the house, and includes a series of 'windows' that frame panoramas of the city below, almost like a series of living postcards.

Leaving Hyères I continued along the coast, pausing at Bormes les Mimosas, a Medieval hill village with pretty streets and covered walkways plunging down steeply toward the marina below. Flowers are everywhere and from December to February the village is bursting with mimosas – an astonishing 60 different varieties grow here.

Fabulous views can be seen from highpoints all along this coast, but I saved the best for last – the spectacular little village of Èze between Nice and Monaco. A *village perché*, or perched village, its ancient houses are packed into a maze of narrow lanes that climb up to the 429m summit of the hill. Not for nothing is Èze nicknamed the 'eagle's nest'.

During my visit there was a medieval *fête* with lots of stalls, displays of puppetry, equestrianism and birds of prey. People were dressed in medieval costumes and a band of troubadours sang, evoking the origins of this now-peaceful place that was once a fortified stronghold.

Above the village is the Jardin Exotique, filled with terraces of aloes, agaves, cactus and succulents, together with sleek terracotta statues of soil goddesses. Right at the top of the garden are the ruins of a 14th century castle, a location which gives wonderful 360-degree views.

I was lucky enough to be invited to lunch at the Château de la Chèvre d'Or, a luxurious Relais & Châteaux hotel at the heart of Èze. Its gardens tumble down the cliffs in a flight of little lawned terraces, many of them with handsome bronze animal sculptures. It's hard to identify exactly where the hotel is because many of its rooms and suites (280-2,900€ per night) are in village houses without even a room number to identify them.

The Chèvre d'Or was originally just a renowned restaurant and its gourmet Chèvre d'Or restaurant currently holds two Michelin stars. However, rooms were added from 1954 after Walt Disney said how nice it would be to stay overnight. Every room is exquisitely and individually decorated – one has a private infinity pool, another a troglodyte-theme bathroom, while yet another is decorated with several paintings by Luis Navarro, an artist friend of Picasso.

The hotel is ultra-discreet about its guests, but it's well known that U2's Bono, who has a house in Èze, is among the stars who drop in for lunch at the panoramic Les Ramparts restaurant – and I can see why! The restaurant occupies a terrace on cliffs high above the sea, overlooking the Saint-Jean-Cap-Ferrat peninsula. Sitting beneath a shady parasol, served after by flawless waiters, you can watch boats of all sizes leaving their white wakes in the Mediterranean waters and it's hard to see the join between blue sea and blue sky.

Excluding drinks, the set lunch menu at Les Ramparts is 65€, with à la carte from around 100€. It's a wonderful way of sampling the Côte d'Azur at its chicest and most romantic – and of enjoying perhaps the most magical view of the Riviera.

BELOW FAR RIGHT: **Stunning views of Cap Ferrat from the Chèvre d'Or at Èze** (Picture: Chèvre d'Or)

BELOW MIDDLE: **Jardin Exotique at Èze** (Picture: OT Èze)

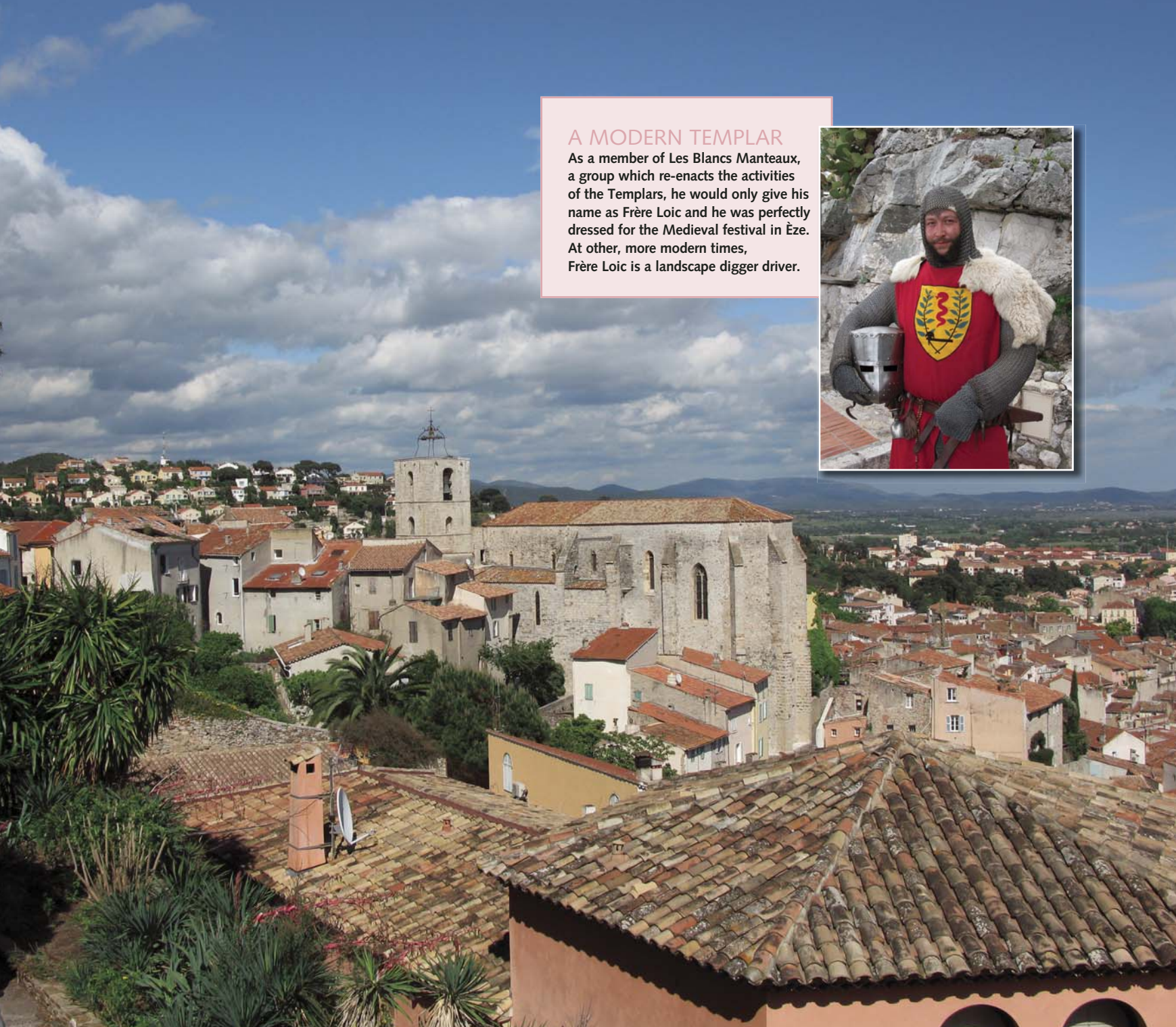
BELOW: **Èze overlooking the Med and nicknamed the Eagles Nest** (Picture: OT Èze)





### A MODERN TEMPLAR

As a member of Les Blancs Manteaux, a group which re-enacts the activities of the Templars, he would only give his name as Frère Loic and he was perfectly dressed for the Medieval festival in Èze. At other, more modern times, Frère Loic is a landscape digger driver.





# PROVENCE & CÔTE D'AZUR

Looking across to Villa Kerylos at Beaulieu-sur-Mer from Villa Ephrussi on Cap Ferrat

## ROSÉ DE PROVENCE

You can't visit Provence without tasting the local rosé wine – and preferably visiting one of the vineyards which make it.

Alban Cacaret welcomed me to the Commanderie de Peyrassol at Flassans sur Issole, an 850ha estate with 80ha of vineyards, some of them on the traditional *restanques*, or dry-stone terraces, which are being lovingly restored. Once a Templars site, Peyrassol makes some red and white wines, but rosé is its jewel, with both AOC wines and *vin de pays* being made.

It's a lovely place to spend the day as there's a sculpture park, lots of countryside to explore, lunches available in the summer, as well as wine to taste.





## WHERE TO STAY & EAT

**Le Relais d'Elle**  
Route de la Brillanne  
Niozelles  
Tel: 00 33 (0)492 75 06 87  
[www.relaisdelle.com](http://www.relaisdelle.com)

*Delightful chambre d'hôte and apartment near Forcalquier in the heart of Haute Provence, with swimming pool and lovely views*

**Hôtel la Bastide St-Georges**  
Route de Banon  
Forcalquier  
Tel: 00 33 (0)492 75 72 80  
[www.bastidesaintgeorges.com](http://www.bastidesaintgeorges.com)

*Stylish and welcoming three-star hotel with pool and new spa facilities in peaceful location*

**Hôtel du Couvent des Minimes**  
Chemin des Jeux de Mai  
04300 Mane  
Tel: 00 33 (0)492 74 77 77  
[www.couventdesminimes-hotelspa.com](http://www.couventdesminimes-hotelspa.com)

*Luxurious four-star l'Occitane spa hotel set in an ancient convent with excellent restaurants and every facility you could wish for*

**Hotel La Ferme Rose**  
04360 Moustiers-Sainte-Marie  
Tel: 00 33 (0)492 75 75 75  
<http://lafermerose.free.fr/>

*An amusingly quirky but very comfortable hotel without restaurant in quiet countryside just outside the town – decor includes collections of ceramic shells, old film equipment, a theatre stage...*

**Hotel-Restaurant les Pins**  
83690 Sillans la Cascade  
Tel: 00 33 (0)494 04 63 26  
[www.restaurant-lespins.com](http://www.restaurant-lespins.com)  
*Small hotel with an excellent, reasonably priced Provençal menu where all the locals eat*

**Hostellerie du Couvent Royal**  
Place Jean Salusse  
83470 Saint-Maximin-la-Sainte-Baume  
Tel: 00 33 (0)494 86 55 66  
[www.hotelfp-saintmaximin.com](http://www.hotelfp-saintmaximin.com)  
*The setting for this hotel is the old convent next to the town's basilica, with beautiful cloisters and rooms in the former monks' cells*

**La Buanderie**  
36 Avenue des Colibris  
83400 Hyères  
Tel: 00 33 (0)494 38 30 98  
[www.la-buanderie.com](http://www.la-buanderie.com)  
*Smart and very welcoming chambre d'hôte set high in the hills with lovely views, garden and swimming pool – a gem*

**Le Bistrot de Marius**  
1 Place Massillon  
83400 Hyères  
Tel: 00 33 (0)494 35 88 38  
*Bustling local restaurant that offers good traditional dishes and excellent value*

**Villa le Port d'Attache**  
1909 Voie Julia  
Quartier de Riquebonne  
06220 Vallauris Golfe-Juan  
Tel: 00 33 (0)493 64 90 64  
[www.portdattache.com](http://www.portdattache.com)  
*Tucked in the hills at Vallauris, this chambre d'hôte is handy for Antibes and Cannes and a super place to stay – stylish and comfortable rooms, plus gardens and a pool*

**Restaurant du Clos Cosette**  
Avenue du Tapis Vert  
06220 Vallauris  
Tel: 00 33 (0)493 64 30 64  
*Cosy welcoming restaurant with lots of pictures on the walls and a good menu*

**Le Café du Coin**  
16 Place Jules Lisnard  
06220 Vallauris  
Tel: 00 33 (0)492 90 27 79  
*A busy local restaurant specialising in food fresh from the market; the very short menu is beautifully cooked in a theatre-style kitchen*

**Taverne du Safranier**  
Place du Safranier  
06600 Antibes  
Tel: 00 33 (0)493 34 80 50  
*Located in the heart of the old town, this traditional tavern specialises in the local fish – it's a great place to watch the world go by*

**Hermitage**  
Grande Corniche  
06360 Èze  
Tel: 00 33 (0)493 41 00 68  
[www.eze-riviera.com/eze/hermitage](http://www.eze-riviera.com/eze/hermitage)  
*Right up in the hills above Èze, this hotel offers very well appointed rooms and delicious food, thanks to the chef who used to work at the famous Negresco in Nice. There's also a pretty garden, pool and play area for kids*

**Château de la Chèvre d'Or**  
06360 Èze Village  
Tel: 00 33 (0)492 10 66 66  
[www.chevredor.com](http://www.chevredor.com)  
*Perched on the hillside overlooking the Med and Cap Ferrat, this hotel offers the ultimate in luxury – pricey but gorgeous*



# PROVENCE & CÔTE D'AZUR

## PICASSO AND THE ARTISTS' TRAIL

I don't know how much a Picasso sculpture would cost, but I guess quite a few millions in any currency. Yet the price of his 'climbing frame' was the last thing on the mind of the little boy clambering up *Man with Sheep*, the Picasso bronze that stands in the middle of the market square at Vallauris.

Behind the sculpture sat a patient tethered dog and a couple of temporarily abandoned bags of shopping. All around were busy market stalls and people chatting – exactly the setting, in fact, that Pablo Picasso had in mind for his artwork. He gave it to the town in 1949 to thank the locals for making him feel so welcome and wanted it put in a public place where everyone could see it. Interestingly there's no plaque to say who created it, but aficionados of the great man's work will recognise it instantly.

Vallauris, a town with a long tradition of making pottery, is tucked in the hinterland behind Cannes and Antibes and was one of several places on the Côte d'Azur where Picasso lived. He first came here on holiday in 1946 and met Suzanne and George Ramie, who ran the Madoura ceramics studio. They gave him a bit of clay which he modelled into a faun's head and two small bulls, his first attempt at ceramics. When he returned the following year, he found his work had been fired – and so had his enthusiasm for pottery.

He was to live in Vallauris from 1948-55, before moving to Cannes and then finally to Mougins, where he died in 1973. During his time in Vallauris he made more than 4,000 ceramic works, as well as painting and making both lithographic and lino-cut posters.

Today you can see some of these works in the town's castle museum. However, the town's biggest treasure is the monumental painting, *War and Peace*, which covers the walls of the castle's Romanesque chapel. Picasso offered to paint the chapel following a banquet hosted by the town's potters to celebrate his 70th birthday. However, it's said that artistic rivalry may have inspired him too... Henri Matisse had already decorated the *Chapelle du Rosaire* at nearby Vence, while Marc Chagall created a mosaic for the baptistry of Vence cathedral.

Head for Antibes to see a superb collection of Picasso paintings, drawings and ceramics in the *Château Grimaldi*, which he used as his studio for a couple of months in 1946. Although spending much of his day on the beach, Picasso was hugely productive here and when he moved back to Paris he left 23 paintings and 44 drawings at the castle.

It's extraordinary to see how he coped with the shortage of materials in this post-war period. Many of the paintings are done in Ripolin, a brand of French paint made for houses and yachts! Look closely at *Le Gobeur d'Oursins* (Sea Urchin Gobbler) and you'll see it's been painted on top of an old portrait that Picasso found in the cellar – you can see the eyes of the original subject just above the hair of the 'gobbler'.

Picasso's *Man with Sheep* in Vallauris







ABOVE: One of Picasso's ceramics at Vallauris



LEFT: Picasso with his wife Jacqueline

BELOW: The painters' trail in Antibes



Spiky shapes representing sea urchins can be spotted on several of the paintings: apparently they were a favourite food of the artist.

Antibes is one of the many towns on the Côte d'Azur which is on a special painters' trail. Reproductions of the works of numerous artists have been positioned in the spots where the artists painted them. Some of the works you'll find in Antibes, for example, include Emile-Charles Dameron's 19th century picture of the market in Le Marché du Cours Masséna, Eugène Boudin's painting of the port and its ramparts along the seafront, and no less than three views by Claude Monet. Other towns on the trail include Menton, Vence, Grasse, Nice, Cannes and Cagnes-sur-Mer.

### MAKE YOUR OWN PICASSO

You can try your hand at lino-cuts like Picasso made with the help of Stéphanie Chauveau who runs a variety of art workshops at the Castle Museum in Vallauris. Ideally bookings should be a week in advance.





# PROVENCE & CÔTE D'AZUR

Antibes and its ramparts  
around the old town



## ABSINTHE EXPERIENCE

Frederic Rosenfelder and his father Daniel run the Absinthe Bar beneath their shop, Balade en Provence, in the Cours Massena of Antibes.

They started it when the infamous 'green fairy' was un-banned in 2002, packing it with a treasure trove of antique absinthe paraphernalia and an eccentric collection of hats for customers to don while indulging.

The bar is great fun to visit and gets packed out some evenings, with people being turned away, so they don't bother to promote it with a website. And you're limited to three drinks!





Garden at Salagon Priory  
(Picture: Musée de Salagon)



## GORGEOUS GARDENS

**A** wide variety of plants thrive in Provence and the Côte d'Azur, so it's not surprising that there are some spectacular gardens to be seen.

One of the most unusual is at the Prieuré de Salagon in Mane in Haut Provence. Built on a Gallo-Roman site, the stone church dates back to the 12th century and is a place that's beautiful in its peacefulness and Romanesque simplicity. The site aims to show the connections between plants and daily life and there are interesting exhibitions of items like tools and basketwork, together with lavender production.

Outside is an ethno-botanical garden which is a joy for plant lovers. It's split into different sections, among them a fragrance garden and a village garden. Another contains contemporary garden plants from all over the world, showing which can be used as dyes, cosmetics, insect repellants and so on. For me the most intriguing part of the garden is the Medieval one. With more than 300 plants, it's arranged into a vegetable garden, medicinal area and flower garden.

On the coast between Bormes les Mimosas and Saint Tropez is the small town of Le Rayol-Canadel

where you will find the remarkable Domaine du Rayol gardens. Covering seven hectares they have been landscaped by Gilles Clément to show Mediterranean landscapes. So as you walk around the garden, you seem to travel around the world.

In the Californian garden, for example, you'll find poppies and lupins, plus a Chaparral area with lots of low shrubs and a Mojave Desert dominated by yucca. Step around the corner to Australia and there are clusters of 'black boys' or grass trees (a slow-growing plant with a false trunk), mimosas and colourful bottlebrush shrubs.

A little further on, New Zealand is planted with tree ferns, palm trees and tea trees or manukas. Nearby in South Africa are acacias, amaryllis, lilies and proteas. And every time the path comes close to the shore, you see gorgeous vistas of the sea and rocks around the garden.

For sheer extravagance it's hard to beat the Villa Ephrussi de Rothschild, which occupies a lofty position on Cap Ferrat. The Belle Epoque villa was built by Béatrice, Baroness Ephrussi in 1912 and the wealthy Béatrice – a member of the Rothschild dynasty – filled her home with an eclectic but fabulous mixture of furniture and decorations.



# PROVENCE & CÔTE D'AZUR

Domaine du Rayol





Like Barbara Cartland after her, Béatrice adored pink and was often dressed from head to toe in it – including her hat and crocodile skin handbag – so of course her house had to be pink too. She ordered masses of antiques to be delivered by train to the local Beaulieu railway station, then made her final choice on the station platform. Once she bought the ruins of an entire chapel, only to keep a single fresco!

Her Louis XVI room has painted wooden panelling originally from the Hôtel de Crillon in Paris and Marie Antoinette's own pearl-decorated whist table. Her bedroom has a Venetian painted ceiling and a collection of 19th century Chinese clothes and shoes. The Fragonard room contains many of the artist's drawings and elegant 18th century furniture. And a monkey room not only has paintings of the creatures on its wooden panels, but also a porcelain orchestra of monkeys and musical instruments made by Meissen.

The gardens more than match this magnificence. Béatrice's idea was that it should look like a cruise liner and she dressed her 30 gardeners like sailors to fit the theme, complete with berets with red pom-poms. The gardens are divided into several 'rooms', among them a stone garden with all sorts of arches and architectural items that couldn't be accommodated inside the house. There's also a rose garden, a Japanese garden, a Spanish garden and a Provençal garden, to mention just a few.

## L'OCCITANE

Factories and plants don't often go together, but at L'Occitane in Manosque they do. The famous beauty products company was founded in 1976 by Olivier Baussan, then a 23-year-old student who enjoyed walking in the local hills with their lavender and wild plants. He bought an old still and made his first distillation of rosemary.

Since then the company has expanded to 1,500 shops worldwide and, while Baussan is no longer the owner, he is still very involved in the company. L'Occitane has strong ethics and, for example, has developed women's co-operatives in Burkina Faso where it sources shea butter. Plants and essential oils remain at the base of its products, many of them sourced from Provence.

You can visit not only the factory, but also its new shop.

Fans of the firm's products may also like to know that there is a L'Occitane spa hotel in nearby Mane, located in the 17th century buildings of Le Couvent des Minimes.

A member of Relais & Châteaux, it's an enchanting building with 46 luxurious rooms and suites with both a gourmet restaurant and a brasserie. The spa is spacious and extensive, offering a huge range of treatments with L'Occitane products.



Couvent des Minimes



L'Occitane products

Domaine du Rayol



Domaine du Rayol



# PROVENCE & CÔTE D'AZUR



Most spectacular of all is the French garden in front of the villa. From the house you see first a long stretch of water, then behind it a stepped waterfall, above which is the Temple of Love, an exact replica of the one at the Trianon. All around are lawns, pots, Renaissance vases and rose beds.

Every 20 minutes music by Mozart, Vivaldi, Bach and Verdi fills the garden. This is the key for the start of a water ballet in which fountains jet changing patterns of water high into the air. Apparently it's a fairly recent introduction to the garden, but I'm sure Béatrice would have approved of it.

## HISTORIC HIGHLIGHTS

It's hard to pick out just a few must-see historic sites as there are lots to see in this region. But among those you might like to take in are:

- ◆ Abbaye du Thoronet, in the Var, was built in 1175 as one of three Cistercian abbeys in Provence known as the 'sisters'. Some of the historic stone buildings are in ruins, but the cloisters, church, dormitory, chapter house and other buildings still stand gracefully in the middle of a wood. Two ancient mulberry trees survive too, but only with the help of bricks and mortar inside them! The church has an extraordinary acoustic which the guides demonstrate by singing. It's deeply moving.
- ◆ Villa Kerylos is situated on the shore at Beaulieu, in sight of Villa Ephrussi across the water. Built by Théodore Reinach from 1902-08, it is a luxurious re-creation of an ancient Greek villa. The rooms are set around a peristyle, or central courtyard, with 12 monolithic columns in white Carrera marble. Although built and lived in during the 20th century, its style is authentically based on noble houses of the island of Delos in the 2nd century BC – right down to the sunken octagonal marble bath, the dining room where guests recline rather than sit for dinner, and lovely mosaics and frescoes.
- ◆ Basilica Sainte Marie Madeleine at Saint Maximin la Sainte Baume is said to be built on the site of the tombs of St Mary Magdalen and St Maximin. Their remains were hidden from the marauding Saracens, but in the 13th century they were rediscovered by Charles II who (in what might be described as an astute tourism marketing strategy) decided to develop a pilgrim route and build the basilica. It's the only Gothic style building in Provence and in the crypt you can see the skull of Mary Magdalen and a piece of her skin, as well as some beautiful 4th century stone sarcophagi.

Villa Kerylos



Abbaye du Thoronet







Beautiful terraced gardens and sculptures at the Hôtel Chevre d'Or in Eze