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TIME TO ESCAPE

Travel writer David Wickers is intoxicated by the scents, flavours, scenery and towns of Provence



WHY I LOVE PROVENCE

Just before my last trip to Provence, I asked a friend who lives there what she'd like me to bring from England. 'Poppadoms', she said. 'We've got everything else.' And how right she was. This gorgeous, exotic, voluptuous back garden of the Mediterranean is embroidered with a bit of everything wonderful: a glamorous coastline and wild mountains, markets that showcase the region's amazing fertility, medieval villages and sophisticated towns. There are Roman ruins and rambling farmhouses, orchards of almonds, peaches and olives, hillsides ribbed by vines, and everywhere those intoxicating fragrances of rosemary, thyme and lavender.

Bordered by the mighty Rhône to the west,

the Riviera to the south, the Alps to the north and Italy to the east, Provence is far too large to tackle in one holiday. Just pick one of its many departments – the Var, Alpes-Maritime, Côte d'Azur, Bouches-du-Rhône, the Camargue and the Vaucluse. The best approach is to slow the tempo. Settle into that perfumed, sleepy, warm air, sip pastis and nibble black olives as big as boules. And never let your pace rise to a trot, let alone a canter.

My favourite pocket of Provence lies somewhere between the sage-green, flower-clothed Luberon hills and the plateau of the Vaucluse, which may be the smallest department, but contains the essence of everything Provençal. But let me also recommend a few scattered highlights, just in case you stray into other parts...



PLACES TO VISIT

Avignon, a small walled city enclosed by pie-crust ramparts, is home to the most famous half bridge in the world and the titanic Palais des Papes, a gothic fortress built by the Popes in the 14th century. Eurostar (eurostar.com) has a direct service from London St Pancras, taking about six hours. L'Isle-sur-la-Sorgue, with its dainty footbridges over streams and waterways, is known as the Venice of Provence. Every Sunday it hosts an enormous market, a hybrid of produce, crafts and (mostly) antiques. Gordes (4) was long neglected and left to crumble during the early 1900s. It's one of a number of dramatic hill towns that tower above the broad Luberon Valley with a maze of narrow streets and ancient houses discovered by artists, including Chagall and Vasarely. Wealthy Parisians later established pieds-à-terre in their wake. There's a good market on Tuesday mornings. Arles (2) on the banks of the Rhône is stocked with Roman legacies, the most impressive being an amphitheatre, second

in size only to the Colosseum in Rome. Its Saturday market is one of France's biggest. Vincent van Gogh stayed in the town in the 1880s and immortalised it in many works.

PLACES TO STAY

Crillon le Brave (3), 25 miles northeast of Avignon, is a splendid boutique hotel made up of eight houses in the eponymous 16th-century medieval hilltop village. Surrounded by vineyards and olive groves, it has stunning views, the food is sublime and there's a spa and heated outdoor pool.

PLACES TO SEE LAVENDER

The 12th-century Cistercian abbey of Sénanque (1) stands tucked away in a lonely valley thick with holm oaks, chestnut, beech trees and aprons of lavender. Wonderfully atmospheric, the weight of silence you feel in the chapel is remarkable.

NATURAL WONDERS

Gorges du Verdon The dramatic cleavage in the limestone, Europe's very own Grand

Canyon, can be explored by self-drive motorboat, pedalo or canoe from below or by a hairy drive along the Route des Crêtes. Mont Ventoux is forested at its legs, thinly vegetated on its chest and virtually bald on top (although a few Polar species manage to flourish). On a clear day, you can see the Pyrenees. Its slopes are, arguably, the most challenging section on the Tour de France. Camargue The Rhône meets the sea at this lagoon-filled delta with horizons that stretch for ever. Its salty marshes are populated by herds of bulls, silver horses and flamingos.

PLACES TO EAT

Maison de la Truffe et du Vin Have lunch on the terrace of this 17th-century restaurant in Ménerbes and sample local wines and truffles – the Vaucluse region being the largest producer in France. La Bastide de Marie (5) in the Luberon Valley is an idyllic spot to dine and wine amid 58 acres of vineyards. Converted from the original 18th-century farmhouse, it's charming and blissfully peaceful.