

# La PERFECTION

# en PROVENCE

Lavender, Roman ruins and a go-with-the-slow pace in France's sunny southern province.

BY **KIMBERLEY LOVATO** ✨ PHOTOGRAPHS BY **CHRISTIAN KERBER**

THIS PAGE: Lavender for sale in Baux-des-Provence. OPPOSITE: A sun-dappled afternoon at Le TIGrr restaurant in La Bastide de Gordes hotel, nestled in the Luberon region.



Nobel laureate and Provençal poet Frédéric Mistral once said, “When the Good Lord begins to doubt the world, he remembers that he created Provence.”

Hyperbole? Maybe. But to anyone who has encountered the sun-lit and slowed-down region of southern France, it’s right on point. Great artists such as Chagall, Cézanne, Renoir and Van Gogh found a muse in Provence, with its light and good life, while writers such as Peter Mayle, the late British author of the 1989 best-selling memoir *A Year in Provence*, have brought a different kind of dazzle. Visitors arrive in droves, but there are still quiet corners to be found in a place that remains tirelessly generous with dreamy scenery.

Spread between the Rhône Alps and the Mediterranean Sea to the north and the south, and the Rhône River and Italian border/French Riviera to the west and east (the French Riviera is considered a different beast from Provence), a diverse patchwork of mountains and valleys, coastline and grapevines inspires. Romans and Greeks may have thought so, too, when they hunkered down here thousands of years ago to build towns and aqueducts. And for dreamers and lovers of postcard France, Provence never disappoints, with its windmills and wicked wind, fields of dusky purple lavender and blue-shuttered villages so picturesque that they conjure up images of happily ever after.

Whether you’re here for the first time or returning for another fix, here’s a piece of advice: Succumb to Provence. It’s more than just a wondrous place. It’s a state of mind.



## — AVIGNON —

Three hours from Paris via high-speed rail, the city of Avignon packs a punch, especially its UNESCO-recognized historic center and medieval ramparts. Once you’ve visited the Papal Palace, the seat of seven popes between 1309 and 1377, and danced on the Saint-Bénézet Bridge (the famous children’s song “Sur le Pont d’Avignon” may get stuck in your head!), Avignon makes an ideal home base for exploring.

**WALK UP AN APPETITE:** Explore Avignon one bite at a time on a guided walking tour. You might taste lavender ganache with an artisan *chocolatier* or try *fougasse*, a sculpted loaf of bread often made with olives, and *navettes*, Provençal cookies shaped like a boat and flavored with orange blossom water. [avignongourmetours.com](http://avignongourmetours.com)

**PROVENCE PROFOUND:** The Alpilles, a rugged and natural landscape of limestone mountains and historic villages between Avignon and Arles, is authentic Provence. Mistral

**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: A narrow rue in Avignon; The Provençal vegetable soup at Le Bistrot du Paradou; Fondation Vincent van Gogh in Arles; A street art image of Van Gogh by Eugène Barricade; A florist in Avignon; An exhibit at Fondation Vincent van Gogh.**

was born in Maillane, and Alphonse Daudet’s famous windmill still lures fans to Fontvieille. Taste the AOC olives and oil along the “Flânerie entre les Oliviers,” a self-guided tour with suggested drives marked with estates and mills. The Citadel of Les Baux-de-Provence, with its 11th-century castle, is a stronghold from the Middle Ages and a pretty place to wander. Book tickets online for the Carrières de Lumières, a former quarry turned high-tech gallery with larger than life masterpieces of great artists projected onto the floors and walls. The Wednesday morning market in Saint-Rémy-de-Provence lures serious shoppers and looky-loos to its pedestrian-friendly streets that spill over with food, wine and typical souvenirs such as Marseille soap, herbes de Provence and

olive wood products. Impressive and well-preserved remnants of the ancient Greek-Roman trading city of Glanum are less than a mile outside Saint-Rémy. [parc-alpilles.fr](http://parc-alpilles.fr), [carrieres-lumieres.com/en](http://carrieres-lumieres.com/en)

**EAT:** There are just a few menu choices (roast Bresse chicken with au gratin potatoes is always on the menu), but Le Bistrot du Paradou in the village of the same name is an institution for good reason. Reservations essential. +33 (0)4 90 54 32 70

**PADDLE POWER:** Burn off the calories with a kayak down the Gardon River and underneath the Pont du Gard aqueduct, a masterpiece of Roman engineering built to carry water to the Roman colony of Nemausus, now Nîmes. [old.kayakvert.com/uk](http://old.kayakvert.com/uk)

**LOCAL TIP:** For a bird’s-eye view of the Alpilles, the Aéro-club of Saint-Remy offers 30-minute intro glider flights, pilot included, bien sûr! [aeroclub-alpilles.fr](http://aeroclub-alpilles.fr)



## — LUBERON —

This east-west massif delivers quintessential Provence in Technicolor spades. Every bend in the road seems to reveal blazing purple patches of lavender or honey-hued perched villages, five of which sport a “Most Beautiful Villages of France” designation. The markets of the Luberon can’t be beat for fresh food, antiques and people-watching while lingering over a glass of pastis, a favorite Provençal apéritif.

**VILLAGE PEOPLE:** Drive the D900 road, stopping to explore the picturesque villages strung out like perched pearls. The white stone houses of Gordes cascading down the hillside are breathtaking, while Roussillon is known for its vibrant red and yellow pigments that your camera will gobble up along the Ochre Trail, an easy walking path. Discover the 13th-century towers of Bonnieux, once a wealthy papal village whose cobbled streets are lined with houses dating to the 16th century. Try to time your visit to sunset, when the purple and orange skies are unbeatable. Crowning the unassuming village of Lacoste is an eponymous 11th-century chateau once owned by the infamous Marquis de Sade and now the country home of fashion designer Pierre Cardin. It’s also the site of a summer music festival. Goult checks all the “cute village” boxes without the crowds, and there’s an excellent restaurant, La Bartavelle, to boot. Oppède-le-Vieux is another oft-overlooked village stuck high atop a craggy outcrop. Stop for lunch or coffee at the tree-shaded Le Petit Café, just about the only game in town. [luberon-apt.fr](http://luberon-apt.fr), [festivaldelacoste.com](http://festivaldelacoste.com), [labartavellegoult.com](http://labartavellegoult.com), [lepetitcafe.fr](http://lepetitcafe.fr)

**TO MARKET:** Going to the market is a favorite pastime for visitors and locals, and there’s one, somewhere, every day in the Luberon region. You name it, vendors sell it: clothing, pottery, baskets, knives, cheese, tomatoes, especially at larger markets such as that in Lourmarin every Friday. On Tuesdays, head to Gordes to peruse the local watercolors and artisan products, such as scented soap from Marseille and olive wood bowls. L’Isle-sur-la-Sorgue is known for its antiques and vintage shops, and on Sundays, vendors line up their wares on the streets to wheel and deal. Tip: Keep your eyes open for local specialties such as candied fruit from Apt; jewel-toned, striped candies called *berlingots* from Carpentras; and the sweetest melon you’ll ever taste from Cavaillon.

**SCENT-SATIONAL:** During peak lavender blooming season, between mid-June and early August, the air is full of the sweet herbal scent, and the oft-photographed Sénanque Abbey—a 12th-century Cistercian abbey near Gordes where monks live, work, pray and tend to the surrounding lavender fields—is a popular stop. [senanque.fr](http://senanque.fr)

**OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:** The Saturday flea market at Beaumettes in the Luberon region; Château de Lourmarin in the Luberon; Poterie Ravel, one of the oldest ceramic works in France, established in 1837 in Aubagne; Le TIGrr restaurant in Gordes, a village in the Luberon; A sculpture by Hiroshi Sugimoto at the Château La Coste winery; Chardon, a pop-up restaurant in Arles that features a different chef roughly every two months.

**DETOUR:** About an hour and a half outside of the Luberon, Valensole is France’s largest lavender growing area (think purple rows as far as the eye can see). The village

tourist office organizes seasonal tours in the summer, but family distilleries such as Lavandes Angelvin stay open all year. The village of Sault celebrates the lavender harvest each August 15, and you’ll find a 2.5-mile marked hike through the purple plumes, with information panels along the route. [lavande-valensole.fr](http://lavande-valensole.fr)

**STAY:** Splurge at La Bastide de Marie, a 14-room estate and spa tucked between the vines of Le Domaine de Marie, outside of Ménerbes, with two swimming pools, art-filled common areas and a gourmet alfresco restaurant. Near Gordes, François and Annette have five bedrooms (with private baths) at Le Mas des Étoiles. Expect a welcome as warm as the morning poolside croissants and travel recommendations offered with a smile. [labastidedemarie.com](http://labastidedemarie.com), [bed-breakfast-gordes.com](http://bed-breakfast-gordes.com)

## — ARLES —

Thanks to abundant Romanesque UNESCO sites, including the two-tiered Arles Arena built in A.D. 90, and a setting that inspired the likes of Vincent van Gogh and Paul Gauguin, Arles is easy to fall for. It was once one of the most important cities of the Roman Gaul, founded by Julius Caesar in 46 B.C. and brimming with art, history and traditional festivals that celebrate its proud heritage. Arles has a vast Saturday market with 450 stalls (try the famous Arles sausages) and makes an ideal springboard for venturing into the Camargue, a nature-filled delta where the Rhône River meets the Med. [arenas-arles.com](http://arenas-arles.com)

**GO VAN GOGH:** Though Vincent van Gogh lived in Arles for only 15 months, from February 1888 to May 1889, he produced such recognizable oeuvres as *Café Terrace at Night*, painted in 1888 at the Place du Forum. Grab a walking tour map from the visitor center to meander by other locations painted by the artist or visit the modern Fondation Vincent van Gogh. [arlestourisme.com](http://arlestourisme.com), [fondation-vincentvangogh-arles.org](http://fondation-vincentvangogh-arles.org)

**TOURING TIP:** Book Taco & Co. for art-, historical- or architecture-themed tours around Arles via electric bike. Sorry, no actual tacos are involved. [tacoandco.fr](http://tacoandco.fr)

**ROAD TRIP:** The sweep of salt flats, marshlands and rice paddies might be less than 30 minutes from Arles, but the Camargue is another world. Here, cowboys known as *guardians* tend to an ancient breed of white horses and black bulls, earning the area a reputation for being the “wild west” of Provence. Get a close-up view of hundreds of species of migratory birds, including pink flamingos, at Ornithological Park of Pont du Gau. There’s much to see and do in the beachfront village of Saintes-Maries-de-

### PLAY BALL

There’s nary a village in France that doesn’t see men, women, teens and children tossing metal balls around a patch of packed dirt in a game called *pétanque*. While similar games of *boules* have been played since antiquity, *pétanque*’s history dates only to 1910 and the shipbuilding village of La Ciotat, near Marseille. Two local brothers, Ernest and Joseph Pitiot, restructured the rules of the Provençal game of *le trois pas*, or three steps (because players took a three-step run before tossing a ball), asking players to stand with their feet anchored, or *pieds tanqués*, which was eventually shortened to *pétanque*.

la-Mer, including watching a course Camarguaise, a no-harm race that matches bulls against daring young men, called *razeteurs*, who attempt to snatch ornaments off the animals' horns. [parcornithologique.com](http://parcornithologique.com), [saintesmaries.com](http://saintesmaries.com)

**REST & RIDE:** The 17th-century Le Mas de Peint has eight rooms and suites and a top area restaurant serving Provençal and Camarguaise dishes with products from the property and region. You also can explore some of the 1,300 acres on a Camargue horse. [masdepeint.com](http://masdepeint.com)

## — VAISON-LA-ROMAINE —

As its name suggests, Vaison-la-Romaine is an ancient Gallo Roman city with one of France's largest archaeological excavation sites. Split by the Ouvèze River, Vaison's "Haute Ville" (upper town) sits beneath a 12th-century castle built by the counts of Toulouse. A 2,000-year-old Roman bridge, still in use, connects to the lower town, where one of the oldest markets in the region unfolds each Tuesday. Pack a picnic for excursions to the Dentelles de Montmirail mountains or Mont Ventoux, Provence's tallest peak at 6,273 feet. For oenophiles, the Côte du Rhône's most scenic wine villages are just a cork's throw away.

**WINE-NOT:** Just outside of town, family wineries and picturesque villages invite you to sip Côte du Rhône wines. Gigondas has several tasting rooms and the one-Michelin-star L'Oustalet. Taste the sweet white Muscat de Beaugues-de-Venise at the family-run cellar of Domaine des Bernardins. The pedestrian-only streets of Vacqueyras turn into a music-filled *soirée* during its two-day Fête des Vins each July. Stop at the wine co-op in Rasteau, the chief producer of the eponymous appellation. Farther afield, Châteauneuf-du-Pape is not just the most recognizable Côte-du-Rhône appellation, it's also a village chock-a-block with tasting rooms and capped with the remnants of a 14th-century castle erected by Pope John XXII of Avignon. [loustalet-gigondas.com](http://loustalet-gigondas.com), [domaine-des-bernardins.com](http://domaine-des-bernardins.com), [cavederasteau.com](http://cavederasteau.com)

**MOUNTAIN HIGH:** The ascent of Mont Ventoux is a grueling leg of the Tour de France, but you can go at your own pace. Better yet, drive to Le Chalet Reynard, a restaurant with a sunny terrace planted at about 4,500 feet. Signposts point the way to the summit for hikers, and the 3-mile trek takes about two and a half hours. [chalet-reynard.fr](http://chalet-reynard.fr)

**WHAT'S COOKING?:** Learn to prepare Provençal specialties with American chef and cookbook author Patricia Wells, who leads several courses throughout the year from her farmhouse in Vaison-la-Romaine, where she's lived for 35 years. [patriciawells.com](http://patriciawells.com)

**SHOWTIME:** Vaison's ancient Roman theater, built around A.D. 20, now hosts modern cultural events such as Vaison Danses. Side trip:

The Théâtre Antique d'Orange, a 30-minute drive from Vaison, is a stunning backdrop for the summer opera festival. [vaison-danses.com](http://vaison-danses.com), [theatre-antique.com](http://theatre-antique.com)

**SOUVENIR ALERT:** Head north about 10 miles to Nyons, a village renowned for its black olives and the locale of France's last remaining *scourtinerie*, a factory making *scourtins*, which has been run by the Fert family since 1882. The coarse, round mats made from the fibers of coconut shells were historically used as a filter in Provence's olive presses. La Scourtinerie now creates décor items such as rugs, placemats and coasters. [scourtinerie.com](http://scourtinerie.com)

## — AIX-EN-PROVENCE —

With its Baroque architecture and stuck-in-time old town full of posh boutiques, cafés and galleries, Aix-en-Provence (usually just called Aix) feels like Paris's Provençal southern sister. Originally called Aquae Sextiae when founded in 122 B.C. for the hot springs running below the city, Aix is also a university town and an enclave for artists past and present. Native son and painter Paul Cézanne created some of his greatest works in the city, and unique events, such as the Blessing of the Calissons, an iconic Aix cookie, keep the Aix love flowing as hot as the thermal waters that bubble up in the Fontaine Moussue, a moss-covered fountain that was built in the 1660s—one of four on the Cours Mirabeau and about 40 located throughout the city.

**GRAND BOULEVARD:** Cours Mirabeau is the Champs-Élysées of Aix, and it links the posh residential Mazarin district at the south end with the old town to the north. Shaded by stately trees and lined with aristocratic 17th- and 18th-century mansions, it's a marvelous stroll. At number 53 is Brasserie Les Deux Garçons, a former haunt of Cézanne and some other notable out-of-towners such as Édith Piaf, Pablo Picasso and Jean-Paul Sartre. *Top Chef* finalist Ronan Kernén helms Côté Cour at number 19, where he conjures up upscale and seasonal Provençal dishes. During the holidays, Cours Mirabeau transforms into a snow globe scene with twinkle lights and dozens of chalets selling mulled wine, black and white nougat and santon figurines. [les2garcons.fr](http://les2garcons.fr), [restaurantcotecour.fr](http://restaurantcotecour.fr)

**SOAK LIKE A ROMAN:** Submerge in the thermal waters at Thermes Sextius, a luxury spa built atop the 2nd-century B.C. excavated remains of the city's old baths, which can be seen beneath a glass floor in the lobby. [thermes-sextius.com](http://thermes-sextius.com)

**ART-AT-HEART:** Architecture, art and gastronomy collide at Château La Coste, a 600-acre vineyard, luxury hotel and impressive sculpture park with works by Andy Goldsworthy, Frank Gehry and other notable artists. Not a hotel at all, the Hôtel de Gallifet is a gallery and cultural center with concerts and contemporary art exhibitions held inside an 18th-century **CONTINUED ON PAGE 89**

**OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:** Carrières de Lumières in Les Baux-de-Provence, a multimedia show that projects art images onto an abandoned limestone quarry; Pont du Gard, a Roman aqueduct in Southern France; Brasserie Les Deux Garçons in Aix-en-Provence; A van advertisement in the Luberon; Sunflowers hang over an alley in Avignon; A café in Aix-en-Provence.



### GOOD-LUCK BUG

*Cigales* (cicadas) are not only the soundtrack of Provence, they are also the region's indisputable mascot. You'll hear them in the trees, especially during summer, when they start to "sing" at about 77 degrees. In shops and markets around the region, you'll find ceramic, wood and metal versions of the locustlike insect, which are often hung on front doors and in homes as a *porte-bonheur*, a good luck charm.

## PROVENCE

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mansion near the Musée Granet, which first opened in 1838 and showcases 750 works of art with a bent toward Provençal painting of the 20th century. A Steps of Cézanne pedestrian route is marked with bronze plaques in the pavement leading to sites connected to the artist's life, including his airy studio. [chateau-la-coste.com/en](http://chateau-la-coste.com/en), [hoteldegallifet.com](http://hoteldegallifet.com), [museegranet-aixenprovence.fr](http://museegranet-aixenprovence.fr), [aixenprovencetourism.com](http://aixenprovencetourism.com), [cezanne-en-provence.com](http://cezanne-en-provence.com)

**FOUNTAIN FETISH:** Aix has been called the City of 1,000 Fountains. While there aren't quite *that* many, they are fun to look for and offer a glimpse into local history. An influential Aix family commissioned the serene Place d'Albertas in the 18th century to echo the royal squares of Paris, but students from the National Conservatory of Arts and Crafts designed the classic fountain in 1912. Cours Mirabeau's fountains include La Fontaine d'Eau Chaude, which is fed by a hot spring and covered in moss, and La Fontaine de la Rotonde, a large bronze beauty built in 1860 that features lions, sirens, swans and angels on the backs of dolphins.

**COASTING:** Less than an hour away, a stop at the Mediterranean is a must, if

only to see the magnificent calanques, narrow inlets of turquoise water flanked by steep cliffs between Marseille, France's second-largest city, and Cassis, a fishing village full of pastel-colored houses and sidewalk cafés. The village of La Ciotat has a pretty waterfront and is known as the birthplace of pétanque, Provence's version of bocce ball. La Calanque de Figuerolle is a simple hotel, restaurant and beach tucked into a calanque. [figuerolles.com](http://figuerolles.com)

**SWEET SOUVENIR:** Aix cookies, callissons, are made with a mix of crushed almonds, candied Provence melon and orange peel, then topped with icing—and they're the ultimate Aix souvenir. You'll find boxes of callissons all over Provence, including at the factory of Roy René Callissons.

**CLAY DAY:** Famed for the quality of its local clay, Aubagne, between Aix and Marseille, has been an epicenter for ceramicists since the Greeks settled there in 600 B.C. At the 180-year-old Poterie Ravel, you can watch potters spin pretty table and garden wares, then start your own collection in the shop. Don't leave without a visit to a *santonnier*, a maker of *santons*, the traditional, handmade clay figurines that are displayed during the holidays. ▼

## ADDITIONAL PHOTOGRAPHY CREDITS

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