

Haute-Provence



Haute-Provence's heady mountain ranges arc across the top of the Côte d'Azur to the Italian border, crowning it with snowy peaks and precipitous valleys cradled high in the Alps.

History hangs in the mountains like mist. The route Napoléon, which Bonaparte followed in 1815 en route to Paris after escaping from Elba, passes through the village of Castellane, one of the gateways to the plunging white waters and luminous lakes of Europe's largest canyon, the Gorges du Verdon. The Gorges' alternate gateway, magical little Moustiers Ste-Marie, has a centuries-old gold star strung between its cliffs. Napoleon's footsteps track north to Digne-les-Bains, a curative thermal spa town surrounded by fantastical fossils and serried lavender fields blazing brightly in the pristine air. Rattling on narrow-gauge tracks to Digne from Nice, 'the pine cone train', an enchanting turn-of-the-20th-century railway, stops at fairy-tale mountain villages along the way.

Forging further north, the route Napoléon passes through Sisteron in the Vallée de la Durance and onward through the Alps. Haute-Provence's sparsely populated northern reaches see a smattering of locals ski the glistening slopes and hike the summer trails of the Blanche and Ubaye valleys. The Ubaye plummets east to the Parc National du Mercantour, Provence's largest national park, where iron-rung ladders and steel cables bolted into the sheer mountainsides form high-altitude climbing routes called *via ferrata* (iron way).

Circled by vultures and roamed by wolves, with a 'valley of wonders' sheltering an incredible 36,000 Bronze Age rock carvings, this wild, remote region puts a whole other slant on Provence.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Ponder the planet's evolution at the Centre de Géologie in **Digne-les-Bains** (p242)
- Amble village streets huddled within the formidable fortifications and forested mountains of **Colmars-les-Alpes** (p251)
- Stargaze at St-Michel l'Observatoire's stellar **Observatoire de Haute-Provence** (p248)
- Heliski in the secluded **Vallée de la Vésubie** (p254)
- Discover the Mexican origins of the architecture at the Musée de la Vallée in **Barcelonnette** (p249)



ITINERARIES

GORGE EXPLORER

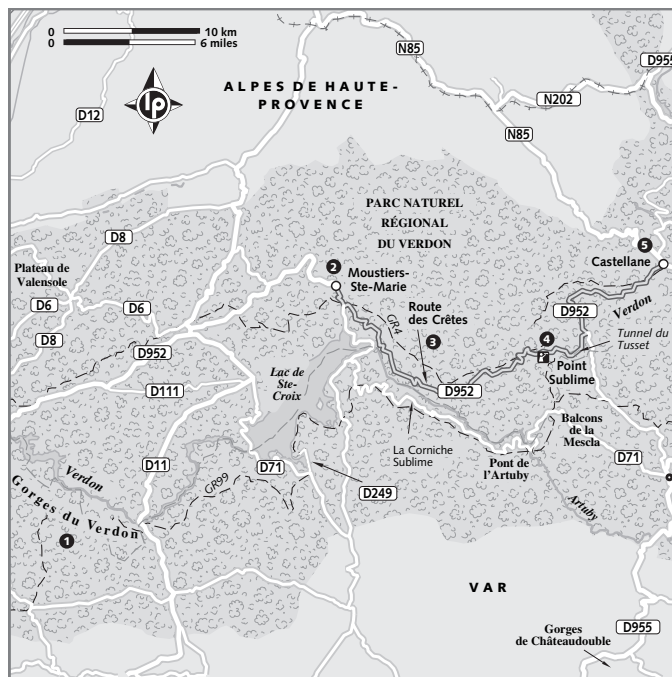
Two Days / Gorges du Verdon

Yawning gorges cleave the region's mountainous terrain, making it a mecca for hikers, rafters and climbers.

The most cavernous gorge (on the entire continent) is the mighty **Gorges du Verdon** (1; p234), often referred to as the Grand Canyon du Verdon. **Cycling or driving** (p235) around the gorges' precarious rimside roads gives you a dramatic introduction to its tortuous topography. Before setting out from **Moustiers Ste-Marie** (2; p237), warm up your calf muscles by heading up to its **cliffside chapel** (p237), then give your energy levels a boost with lunch at **Les Comtes** (p239). Afterwards (in the warmer months, when the road's open) take the **route des Crêtes** (3; p235) along the northern rim to **Point Sublime** (4; p235) for giddy gorge views. If you're planning to **walk** (p236) the gorge in its entirety, pick up the GR4 here for a full two-day trek through the canyon, or tackle a shorter section.

Continue along the route des Crêtes, stopping at the **Belvédère de l'Escalés** (p235) for more heart-lurching views, often with **vultures** (p236) wheeling overhead. Further along the route des Crêtes is **Castellane** (5; p236), with a rock-perched **church** (p236) of its own.

After resting up, sign up the next day for **white-water sports** (p236) such as rafting, hot-dogging or aqua-trekking. Or part-swim, part-scramble through the gorges' subterranean depths on a **canyoning expedition** (p236).



LAVENDER FIELDS FOREVER

One Day / Forcalquier to Digne-les-Bains

Living is easy in Provence when summer brings postcard images to life with row upon serried row of lavender colouring the countryside. To see it at its blooming best, follow this route between late June and mid-July. From mid-July to mid-August you'll see – and smell – the harvest in progress.

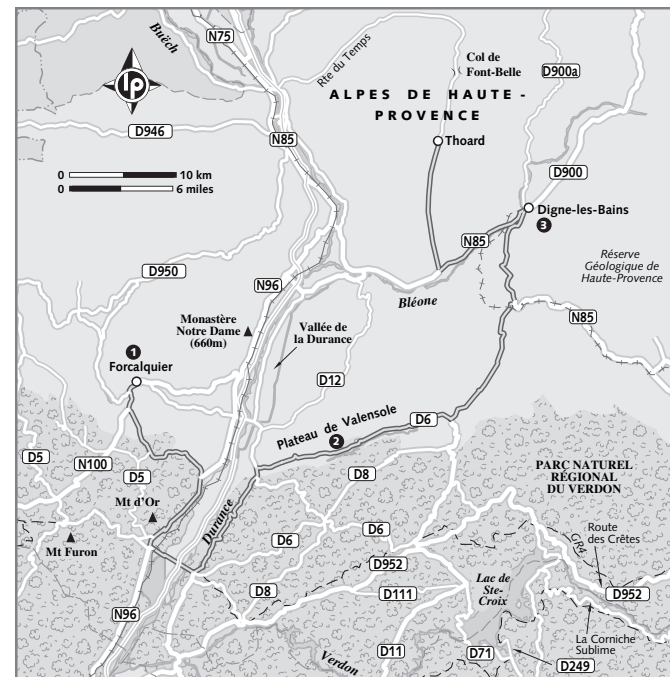
Pack a picnic in **Forcalquier** (1; p246), then cycle or drive with the windows down to the scented gardens of Mane's beautiful 13th-century priory, **Prieuré de Salagon** (p247), and visit its on-site lavender museum.

Cross the River Durance and traverse the little-trafficked D6 along the **Plateau de Valensole** (2; p244), where Provence's greatest concentration of farms create purple ribbons intertwined with white-gold wheat. En route you'll pass places to buy lavender honey as well as scenic spots to stop for lunch.

Continue north to **Digne-les-Bains** (3; p242); time it right and you could catch the **lavender festival** (p243). Pick up a **walking map** (p242) or organise a **guided hike** (p243) through the wild lavender growing in the mountains surrounding Digne.

Head 20km northwest to Thoard to visit its old-fashioned **distillery** (p244), then have an **afternoon farm tea** (p243) and, for a longer ramble through the lavender-strewn mountains, hire a **donkey** (p243).

If you're a golfer, you can swing a club through lavender fields at Digne's **Hôtel du Golf** (p243). And to immerse yourself, literally, in the heady herbs, take a decadent **lavender bath treatment** (p242).



GORGES DU VERDON

Europe's largest canyon, the plunging Gorges du Verdon, slices a 25km swathe through Provence's limestone plateau. Along with a wealth of white-water sports, there's also breathtaking bird-watching, including the canyon's very own colony of reintroduced griffon vultures.

ORIENTATION

Having been under the protection of the Parc Naturel Régional du Verdon since 1997, the gorges begin at Rougon near the confluence of the Verdon and the Jabron rivers, and then wind westwards until the Verdon's green waters flow into Lac de Ste-Croix. At a dizzying 250m to 700m deep, the gorges' floors are just 8m to 90m wide, and their overhanging rims are from 200m to 1500m apart.

The two main jumping-off points for exploring the gorges are the villages of Castellane, east of Rougon, and Moustiers Ste-Marie.

Maps

You can walk most of the canyon along the often-difficult GR4, a route covered by Didier-Richard's 1:50,000 map No 19, *Haute-Provence-Verdon*.

INFORMATION

Castellane tourist office (☎ 04 92 83 61 14; www.castellane.org; rue Nationale; ☎ 9am-12.30pm & 2-6.45pm Mon-Sat Mar-Oct, also 10am-12.30pm Sun Jul & Aug, 9am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Fri Nov-Feb)

Moustiers Ste-Marie tourist office (☎ 04 92 74 67 84; www.moustiers.fr; ☎ 10am-12.30pm & 2-5.30pm Mar & Oct, 10am-12.30pm & 2-6pm Apr & May, 10am-12.30pm & 2-6.30pm Jun, 9.30am-12.30pm & 2-7.30pm Jul-Sep, 10am-noon & 2-5pm Nov, 2-5pm Dec-Feb)

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

The river in the upper part of the canyon can rise very suddenly if the hydroelectric dams upstream are opened, making it difficult, if not impossible, to cross. Check water levels and weather forecasts with the tourist office before you set out.

Roads may be closed due to rock falls and/or snow, so check ahead. Keep an eye on your

fuel gauge as petrol stations are few and far between.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

High-adrenaline activities abound in and around the canyon. When you need a change of pace, take a stroll around the villages of Moustiers Ste-Marie and Castellane.

The Canyon

The gorges' deep floors are only accessible by foot or raft. Motorists and cyclists can take in staggering panoramas from two vertigo-inducing cliffside roads.

BUNGEE JUMPING & PARACHUTING

Hurtle through the air on a death-defying jump from Europe's highest bungee site, the 182m Pont de l'Artuby, with self-described 'dealers in adrenaline', **Latitude Challenge** (☎ 04 91 09 04 10; www.latitude-challenge.fr in French; €98; ☎ Sat & Sun by reservation). If you're game, second and subsequent jumps on the same day cost €45 (€58 for subsequent jumps on other days). Too tame? Freefall with the company's parachuting programmes. Solo/tandem jumps start from €221/236.

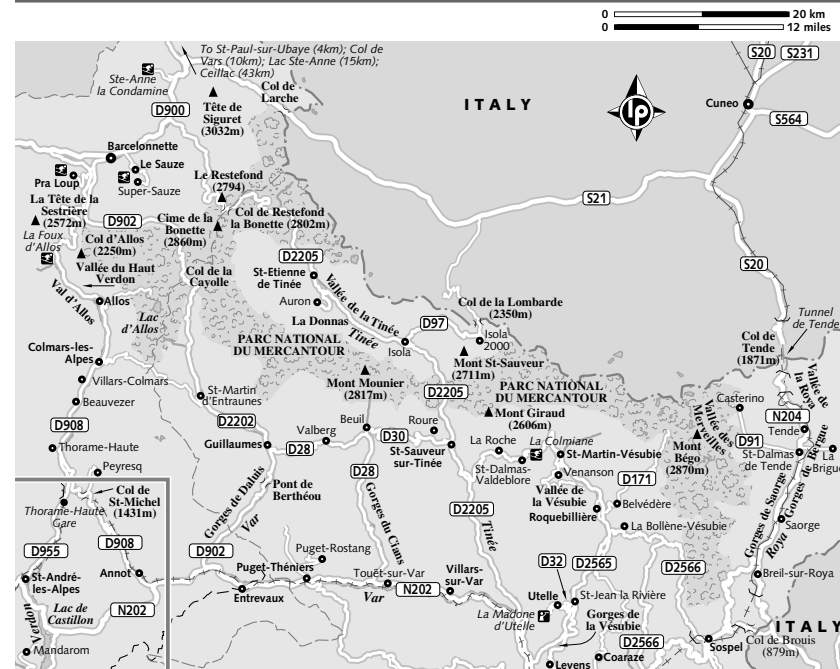
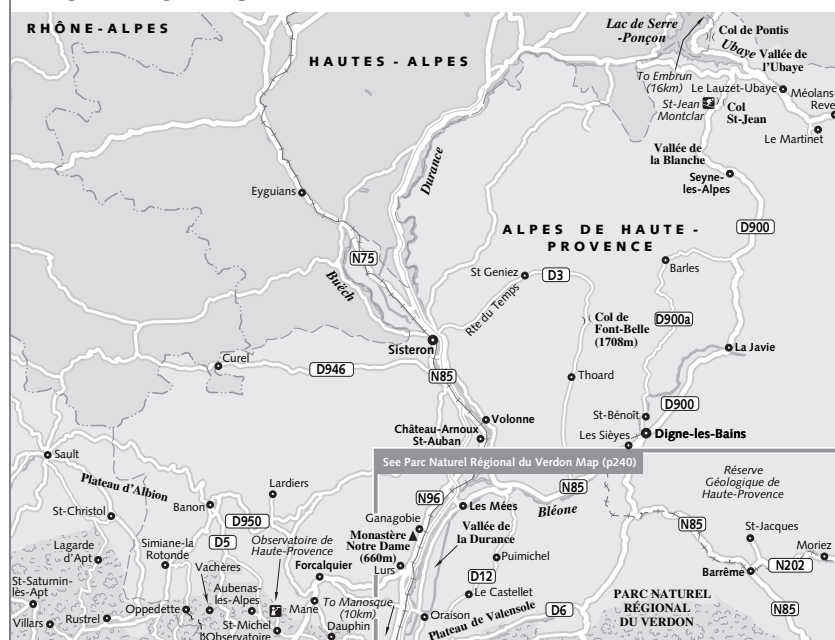
CYCLING & DRIVING

The **route des Crêtes** (the D952 and D23; closed November to February) corkscrews along the gorges' northern rim, past **Point Sublime**, which offers a fish-eye-lens view of serrated rock formations falling away to the river below. The best view from the northern side is from **Belvédère de l'Escalès**. Drive to the third bend and steel your nerves for the stunning drop-off into the gorge. (The belvedere is also one of the best places to spot vultures; see p236.) At its eastern end, the narrow D317 scales 3km to the quaint village of **Rougon** (population 85, elevation 963m).

Also heart-palpitating, **La Corniche Sublime** (the D19 to the D71) twists along the southern rim, taking in landmarks such as the **Balcons de la Mescla** (Mescla Terraces) and **Pont de l'Artuby** (Artuby Bridge), the highest bridge in Europe.

A complete circuit of the Gorges du Verdon involves about 140 unremitting kilometres of driving. Castellane and Moustiers tourist offices have English-language driving itineraries. The only real village en route is **La Palud-sur-Verdon** (population 300, elevation

HAUTE-PROVENCE AREA



VULTURE CULTURE

Soaring high above the canyon, with a wingspan of 3m, the griffon vulture (*Gyps fulvus*) is an awe-inspiring sight. Once common in Provence, the species was a useful carrion eater, which helped prevent water pollution. The shotgun and loss of food sources such as the bear and wolf, however, caused its disappearance almost a century ago.

In 1999, 12 young birds were reintroduced into the wild at Rougon. It took them two weeks to learn to fly again, but they eventually settled in the Gorges du Verdon. A total of 90 vultures were released over the following five years and have now formed a breeding colony.

Between June and September half-day vulture-watching walks around Rougon depart from Castellane's tourist office (p234) at 9am (9.30am from Rougon) on Wednesday from June to September (plus Tuesday and Thursday in July and August). Walks cost €6/3 for adults/students (children under 10 free).

The Belvédère de l'Escalès (p235) is one of the best free vantage points to see the vultures in flight.

930m), 2km northeast of the northern bank of the gorges. Traffic on the single-lane roads frequently slows to snail's pace in summer; in winter, roads can be icy. Any time of year watch out for falling (and fallen) rocks.

WALKING

From Point Sublime, the GR4 descends to the bottom of the canyon where walkers and whitewater rafters can experience an overwhelming series of cliffs and narrows. The GR4 is detailed by Didier-Richard's 1:50,000 map No 19, *Haute Provence-Verdon*. It's also included in the excellent English-language book *Canyon du Verdon – The Most Beautiful Hikes* (€4.12), available at the tourist offices, which lists 28 walks in the gorges. The full route takes two days, though short descents into the canyon are possible from a number of points. Bring a torch (flashlight) and drinking water. Camping on gravel beaches is illegal.

In addition to canyon descents, dozens of blazed trails fan out from Castellane and Moustiers through the untamed countryside.

WATER SPORTS

Castellane is the main base for water-sports companies; all offer similarly priced guided trips from April to September by reservation. High-adrenaline activities include rafting (€55/75 per half/full day); canyoning expeditions in the gorges' crevices (€45/70); hot-dogging (bombing down the river in an inflatable canoe; €38 self-navigated); hydrospeed trips with a bodyboard (€45); water trekking (€31); and water-rambling with mountain bikes (€15/22 per half/full day).

For the truly adventurous, **Guides Aventure** (☎ 06 85 94 46 61; www.guidesaventure.com) organises 'floating' (€45/90 per half/full day) – it's like white-water rafting minus the raft, with a buoyancy bag strapped to your back – and also runs a range of canyoning, rock-climbing and rafting trips.

Other water-sports operators include **Aboard Rafting** (☎ 04 92 83 76 11; www.aboard-rafting.com; 8 place de l'Église, Castellane) and **Buena Vista Rafting** (☎ 04 92 83 77 98; www.buenavistarafting.com; 31 rue Nationale, Castellane).

Castellane

The small, cobbled streets of Castellane (population 1539, elevation 723m) surrounding central place Marcel Savaire and adjoining place de l'Église teem with tourist facilities and water-sports shops.

Perched above the town on a needlelike rock is **Chapelle Notre Dame du Roc** (1703). It's open from Easter to September; between October and Easter, take the key from the box outside Église Paroissiale in town (at the northeastern end of place de l'Église). A walking trail (45 minutes) leads from place de l'Église to the chapel. Each year on 15 August (Assumption Day) a procession of pilgrims goes by torchlight up to the rock to celebrate Mass.

Mermaid mythology and fossil facts are the subject of the **Musée Sirènes et Fossiles** (☎ 04 92 83 19 23; www.resgeol04.org in French; place Marcel Sauvaire; adult/7-15yr €4/2.50; ☞ 10am-noon & 2-5pm Wed-Sun May-Sep, 9am-noon & 2-5pm Wed-Sun Apr & Oct). The captivating **Musée de la Résistance** (☎ 04 92 83 78 25; rte de Digne; adult/12-18yr €3/1.50; ☞ Apr-Sep by appointment), about 1.5km along the road to Digne, is a private collection dedicated to heroes of the Resistance.

Moustiers Ste-Marie

Strung between the two limestone cliffs towering either side of the little village of Moustiers Ste-Marie (population 635, elevation 634m), a 227m-long gold chain bearing a shining star was suspended, so legend claims, by the Knight of Blacas, grateful to have returned safely from the Crusades. Twice a century the weathered chain gives way and the star is replaced.

Beneath the star, clinging to a cliff ledge, is the 14th-century **Chapelle Notre Dame de Beauvoir**, built on the site of an AD 470 temple. A trail climbs up from rue de la Bourgade to the chapel and its waterfall, passing 14 stations of the cross en route; count on at least 30 minutes each way. In July and August, guided tours take place at 10am on Tuesday. On 8 September each year, Mass is held at 5am to celebrate the Virgin Mary's nativity, followed by a communal breakfast on the square.

When silverware was reclaimed by the French kingdom and melted down to mint currency, the village's decorative faïence (earthenware) graced Europe's palaces. Antique masterpieces can be admired in the **Musée de la Faïence** (☎ 04 92 74 61 64; musee-moustiers@wanadoo.fr; rue de la Bourgade; adult/16-18yr €2/1; ☞ 10am-12.30pm & 2-7pm Wed-Mon Jul & Aug, 10am-12.30pm & 2-6pm Wed-Mon Apr-Jun, Sep & Oct) adjacent to Moustiers' *marie* (town hall). After ceasing in 1870, the industry was resurrected in 1927 and found new popularity in the late 1960s. Today there are 15 ateliers in Moustiers, including **Atelier St-Michel** (☎ 04 92 74 67 73; www.faïence-ateliersaintmichel.com). Husband-and-wife artisans Martial and Françoise Baudey and their son Sylvain have a shop at the top of the village on place Pomey (closed January),

and an atelier at the bottom of the village in the St-Michel quarter where they conduct **workshop tours** (€3) at 11am on Thursday in July and August, showing you step-by-step how they craft the intricate pieces.

SLEEPING & EATING Castellane & Around

The nearby river is lined with seasonal camping areas (open from April or May until September) charging around €15 to €25 for two adults with a tent and car in high summer. In town, hotels and restaurants cluster around place Marcel Sauvaire and place de l'Église. Hotels recommended here have restaurants.

CHAMBRES D'HÔTES

Gîte de Chasteuil (☎ 04 92 83 72 45; www.gitedechasteuil.com; Hameau de Chasteuil; s/d/tr incl breakfast from €52/59/77; ☎ ☞) Walkers will find this *chambre d'hôte* in an old schoolhouse in the 16th-century hamlet of Chasteuil an irresistible stop on the G4, which passes right outside. Host Nancy hand-makes the soaps in the bathrooms, and *tables d'hôtes* (from €20) are served from Monday to Thursday, July to September, with an evening picnic basket available the rest of the year. Chasteuil sits 8km southwest of Castellane.

HOTELS

Ma Petite Auberge (☎ 04 92 83 62 06; fax 04 92 83 68 49; rue de la République; d €46-67, mains from €12; ☞ closed mid-Nov–mid-Mar; ☎ ☞) An intimate two-star hotel overlooking Castellane's central square, Ma Petite Auberge has 15 light-filled, airy, elegantly old-fashioned rooms, a peaceful garden shaded by an enormous lime tree, and a bustling restaurant. Parking's free.

WEARABLE ART

Think of faïence pottery, and you would normally think of the plates and serving dishes that served the kings and queens of their day, but artisans Martial, Françoise and Sylvain Baudey are now turning this ancient tradition into a wearable art form.

Madame Baudey explains:

'Faïence jewellery gives an opportunity to wear this traditional art and is fun and different. It's nice because every piece is made by hand. There are no moulds, so every finished item is completely unique in its form and its decoration. It's also easier to take the jewellery to the markets in the region – we don't take the plates to the markets because they're too fragile and expensive, whereas jewellery is easy to transport.'

Twice-fired and glazed for a dazzling brilliance, the jewellery is durable, surprisingly weightless to wear, and makes the ultimate statement in chic for a fashion accessory – individuality.

Hôtel Restaurant de la Forge (☎ 04 92 83 62 61; <http://perso.wanadoo.fr/forge>; place de l'Église; d/q from €42/60, menu €18; ☹ closed Dec & Jan) Fronted by a pretty terrace festooned with flowers in summer, this little eight-room place sits at the foot of the Rock. Rooms have dinky wooden shutters and comfy beds and come with TVs and telephones. The restaurant's open for lunch and dinner from Sunday to Friday, with a bargain €10 *plat du jour*.

Nouvel Hôtel Restaurant du Commerce (☎ 04 92 83 61 00; www.hotel-fradet.com; place de l'Église; d €60-70, tr €75-85, menus €22-29; ☹ closed Oct-Mar; ☎) Renovated top to bottom in 2006, this exceptionally friendly spot opening to a large, new, private garden – and new, free parking – is best known for its 'rustic-gastronomic' restaurant serving favourites so Provençal that Mistral himself would be proud.

CAMPING

Domaine de Chasteuil Provence (☎ 04 92 83 61 21; www.chasteuil-provence.com; camping €11-16; ☹ May–mid-Sep; 🚰) Just south of Castellane, this camping ground has lovely, leafy grounds, optional powered sites, and timber chalets (from €111 for two nights for four people).

Moustiers Ste-Marie & Around

Moustiers has some ultracharming spots to eat and sleep.

GÎTES & FERMES AUBERGE

Le Petit Segries (☎ 04 92 74 68 83; www.gite-segries.fr; Moustiers; d/tr incl breakfast €55/71, table d'hôte incl wine €18, picnic basket €3.50-8; ☎) At this energetically-run *gîte* housing six French-washed rooms, guests and nonguests can rent bikes (from €14 per half-day) or sign up for a bike tour (from €65 per half-day) to hidden spots known only to locals such as hosts Sylvie and Noël. By night, join in lively tables d'hôtes at a massive custom-made chestnut table with farm-fresh lamb, rabbit, eggs and mountain honey. Le Petit Segries is 5km northwest of Moustiers village – take the D92 towards Riez and turn right at the top of the hill; it's 300m ahead on your right.

La Ferme Ste-Cécile (☎ 04 92 74 64 18; www.ferme-ste-cecile.com in French; quartier St-Michel; menus €24-46; ☹ closed Mon & mid-Nov–Dec) Fresh fish with roast garlic and fennel ice cream, and anchovies with olive ice cream, are among the delicious culinary surprises served on the terrace of this authentic *ferme auberge* (farmhouse restaura-

rant), 1km out of the village centre along the D952. The last Friday of every month features a wine tasting accompanied by a meal (€50) – book ahead.

HOTELS

Hôtel-Restaurant Le Relais (☎ 04 92 74 66 10; www.lerelais-moustiers.com; place du Couvert; d €50-80, menus €21-29; ☹ closed mid-Nov–Feb; ☎) With glorious views of the sun rising between Moustiers' star-strung cliffs from the rear east-facing rooms, this apricot-coloured family-run place up in the village has an excellent restaurant (lunch and dinner Saturday to Thursday) specialising in river-caught fish. Parking's free.

Hôtel le Baldaquin (☎ 04 92 74 63 92; place Clerisy; d €60-99; ☹ Mar–mid-Nov; ☎) Experience heart-warming hospitality at this 17th-century, blue-shuttered place in the village centre. It feels more like a home than a hotel, with seven rooms hung with Renoir and Degas prints. Garaged parking costs €5, and the buffet breakfast (€9) will assuage the heartiest hiker's appetite.

Hôtel Le Clos des Iris (☎ 04 92 74 63 46; www.closdesiris.fr; chemin de Quinson; d €62-67, tr & q €95-110; ☹ closed Dec; ☎) Down a country lane, this charming house has an untamed, flowery garden dotted with blue ceramic tiled tables. Rooms all have shady private terraces looking onto the lawns. Advance bookings are essential.

La Bastide de Moustiers (☎ 04 92 70 47 47; www.bastide-moustiers.com; d low/high season from €155/180;

AUTHOR'S CHOICE

La Ferme Rose (☎ 04 92 74 69 47; www.lafermerose.fr in French; chemin de Quinson, Moustiers; d €80-145; ☎) This fabulous converted farmhouse contains quirky collections including antique toys, a Wurlitzer jukebox with 45in records, a display case of coffee grinders, and old telephones, telex machines, theatre lighting and projectors. Its dozen boutique rooms, draped with embroidered white cotton sheets and canopies, are named for the colour dramatising each chic sleeping area and glazed bathroom; and for sun-baskers, the 'almond room' has a private terrace overlooking unfolding paddocks, with reclining lounges and a fibreglass-sculpted boulder. Find 'the pink farm' signposted off the D952 on Moustiers' fringe.

AUTHOR'S CHOICE

Les Comtes (☎ 04 92 74 63 88; rue de la Bourgade, Moustiers; mains €12-20; ☹ lunch Tue-Sun, dinner Tue-Sat, closed Nov-Feb) Any meal at this low-key, luscious little bistro in Moustiers' village invariably starts with an aperitif from the Vallée de l'Ubaye made from mountain fruits such as blueberries and raspberries. Follow it up with a main course such as squid-ink tagliatelle with saffron; or a 'one-meal plate' laden, for instance, with goat's cheese pie, an aubergine terrine, cherry tomatoes, black-olive *tapenade*, mixed salad, raw fennel and grilled peppers. Meals can be accompanied by a handpicked glass of wine (€2 to €2.50), selected to match individual dishes. Still going strong? Desserts include a fig and pine-nut pie with fig ice cream. In summer, dine in the sunshine at wooden tables; when the chill sets in, head for the cavelike dining room. Credit cards aren't accepted.

menus €42-57; ☎) Some of France's finest chefs get their start at this bastion belonging to Alain Ducasse. Inside the rose-draped archways and thick stone walls of this old master-potter's studio are poetic rooms. Outside, baby deer scamper in the grounds, and yes, there's a place to park the helicopter. One room is wheelchair accessible.

CAMPING

Domaine de Le Petit Lac (☎ 04 92 74 67 11; www.lepetitlac.com; route du lac de Ste-Croix; camping incl electricity €14-22.50, 4-person ecocabins per night, min 2 nights, from €45; ☹ camping mid-Jun–Sep, cabins Apr–mid-Oct; 🚰) In a peaceful lakeside spot, this activity-oriented camping ground has new ecocabins with hemp walls, solar hot water and low-output electricity.

Other Moustiers dining recommendations:
Côte-Jardin (☎ 04 92 74 68 91; rue de Léris; mains €19-27; ☹ closed Wed & dinner Tue, closed Nov & Dec) Dine under the oak trees overlooking the valley.
La Treille Muscate (☎ 04 92 74 64 31; place de l'Église; menus €25-34; ☹ closed Thu & dinner Wed in low season, Wed in high season, closed mid-Nov–Jan) In the heart of the village.

GETTING THERE & AROUND

Public transport to, from, and around the Gorges du Verdon is limited. **Autocars Sumian**

(☎ 04 42 67 60 34) runs buses from Marseille to Castellane (€19.90, 2¼ hours) via Aix-en-Provence (€16.30, 1¾ hours); and from Castellane to Moustiers (€7.30, one hour).

VFD (☎ 04 93 85 24 56, 08 20 83 38 33) operates a daily bus from Grenoble to Nice via Digneles-Bains and Grasse, stopping en route in Castellane (from Nice €17, 2¼ hours). Tourist offices in Castellane and Moustiers Ste-Marie have schedules.

Castellane and Moustiers tourist offices have information on bike rental. In Castellane, try **Aqua Viva Est** (☎ 04 92 83 75 74; www.aquavivaest.com; 12 blvd de la République). Mountain bikes start from €10/20 per half-/full day.

LACS DU VERDON

Shimmering an unearthly opaque jade green due to their high mineral content, the Verdon lakes appear as timeless as the area's ethereal gorges. They were, in fact, created by the national electricity company in the second half of the 20th century to provide hydroelectricity, irrigation for cities including Aix and Toulon, and tourism. Today these five mountain lakes offer scenic swimming, water sports and sunbathing on the pebbly shores. Be sure to stick to designated swimming areas as the hydroelectric dams make other sections of the lakes dangerous.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Charming villages, a storybook castle and a prehistoric cave lie by the Verdon's lakes.

Lac de Ste-Croix

The largest of the lakes, Lac de Ste-Croix, was formed in 1974 and stretches 10km southwest of Moustiers Ste-Marie. Pretty **Bauduen** (population 276) sits on its southeastern banks. Camp sites dot the lakeside D71 and D249, leading to the village. Bauduen has a small **tourist office** (☎ 04 94 84 39 02; bauduen-sur-verdon.com in French; rue de Juterie), as does the village of **Les Salles-sur-Verdon** (☎ 04 94 70 21 84; www.sallessur-verdon.com; place Fontfreyre), which has information on the town's lavender distilleries.

Ste-Croix de Verdon (population 103, elevation 525m) is the only village on the western banks of the lake.

By the lake, scads of summertime rentals by the hour include windsurfers, electric boats, canoes and kayaks, as well as paddleboats (not

ideal when it's windy as it's difficult to get out onto the lake).

Lac de Quinson

Lac de Quinson, about 1km south of the town of Quinson, sits at the southernmost foot of the lower Gorges du Verdon.

In Quinson (population 354), the hi-tech **Musée de la Préhistoire des Gorges du Verdon** (☎ 04 92 74 09 59; www.museeprehistoire.com; rte de Montmeyan; adult/6-18yr/family €7/5/20; ☞ 10am-8pm Jul & Aug, 10am-7pm Wed-Mon Apr-Jun & Sep, 10am-6pm Wed-Mon Feb, Mar & Oct-mid-Dec, closed mid-Dec-end Jan), the creation of British architect Norman Foster, explores the gorges' prehistoric past and archaeological treasures. In July and August it organises expeditions to the **Grotte de la Baume Bonne**, a prehistoric cave discovered by archaeologists in the 1960s.

Fresh truffles are unearthed around quaint **Montagnac** (population 326), 11km north of Quinson off the D11. Eight kilometres west is **Allemagne-en-Provence** (population 384). Contrary to widespread belief, its name isn't German-inspired (despite Allemagne being French for 'Germany'), but is a derivative of the Roman Goddess of fertility, Alemona. Her likeness appears on the village's centrepiece,

the turret-topped 12th- to 16th-century **Château d'Allemagne** (☎ 04 92 77 46 78; guided tours €6; ☞ tours 4pm & 5pm Tue-Sun Jul-mid-Sep, 4pm & 5pm Sat & Sun Easter-Jun & mid-Sep-Oct), a fairy-tale castle where would-be princes and princesses can sojourn (see opposite).

Lacs de Chaudanne & Castillon

At the eastern end of the Gorges du Verdon, Lac de Chaudanne has steep-sided banks, but Lac de Castillon's gently sloping beaches are ideal for swimming and its waters suitable for paddleboating.

From Lac de Castillon, the single-lane D402 cuts into the mountains to the walled **Cité Ste-de-Mandaron Shambhasalem** (Holy City of Mandaron Shambhasalem; ☎ 04 92 83 63 83; www.aumisme.org; adult/10-18yr/student €5/2/3; ☞ 10-11.15am & 3-4.30pm Jul & Aug, 3-4.30pm Sat & Sun Sep-Jun), glittering with a 22m Buddha, a giant statue of Christ and temples representing the world's major religions. The 'holy city' is the home of Aumism, founded in 1969 by Gilbert Bourdin (1923-98), aka the Holy Lord Hamsah Manarah, as the 'Religion of the Unity of God's Faces'. Inside the walls, monks in multicoloured robes and mirrored headbands pray for world peace while chant-

MARKET DAY

Market days in the mountains prod sleepy villages and towns into frantic action. Delicacies include wild-boar sausages, fragrant herbs, AOC olive oil, locally made cheeses (including leaf-wrapped Banon; see p249), lavender honey and all the olives your poor stomach can stand. The markets listed below start early in the morning and wrap up at about noon or 1pm.

Monday Forcalquier

Tuesday Breil-sur-Roya, Colmars-les-Alpes, Seyne-les-Alpes

Wednesday Barcelonnette, Castellane, Digne-les-Bains, La Foux d'Allos, La Palud-sur-Verdon, Sisteron, St-André-les-Alpes, Tende

Thursday Allemagne-en-Provence, Allos, Les Salles-sur-Verdon, Montagnac, Sospel

Friday Colmars-les-Alpes, Entrevaux, Moustiers Ste-Marie, Quinson, Seyne-les-Alpes

Saturday Barcelonnette, Castellane, Digne-les-Bains, Sisteron, St-André-les-Alpes

Sunday Bauduen (summer only), La-Palud-sur-Verdon (summer only)

Daily St-Martin-Vésubie

ing the holy word 'Aum'. Though it looks for all the world like an outpost of EuroDisney, the compound is revered by its residents; visitors must be dressed modestly.

St-André-les-Alpes (population 832, elevation 914m) is France's leading paragliding centre. Take off with **Aérogloss** (☎ 04 92 89 11 30; www.aerogloss.com; chemin des ldes), where a five-day beginner's course costs between €445 and €475, and 10-/20-plus minute baptism tandem paragliding sessions cost €60/85. If you can't wait to download those photos for your friends and family to see, there's free wi-fi within a 50m radius of the school.

Also in St-André-les-Alpes, 30 types of sausage are sold at the **Maison du Saucisson** (House of Sausages; ☎ 04 92 89 03 16; place de Verdun; ☞ closed Mon winter), including donkey, ostrich and wild boar. The **tourist office** (☎ 04 92 89 02 39; www.ot-st-andre-les-alpes.fr; place Marcel Pastorelli; ☞ 9am-noon & 2-5pm Mon-Fri, 10am-noon & 2-6pm Sat, 10am-noon Sun mid-Jun-mid-Sep, 9am-noon & 2-5pm Mon-Fri mid-Sep-mid-Jun), in St-André's village centre, has loads of local info.

St-André is linked with eastern Provence and Nice by the narrow-gauge mountain railway (see p245).

SLEEPING & EATING

Camp sites crowd in and around Ste-Croix de Verdon; ask at the Castellane tourist office. St-André's tourist office has information about camping in the Lac de Castillon area.

Château d'Allemagne (☎ 04 92 77 46 78; Lac de Quinson; d €80-140; ☞ ☞) Stroll the grounds filled with 100-year-old trees surrounding this magnificent castle, dip in the swimming pool, or just be swept away with the romance of it all in one of just three *chambre d'hôte* rooms

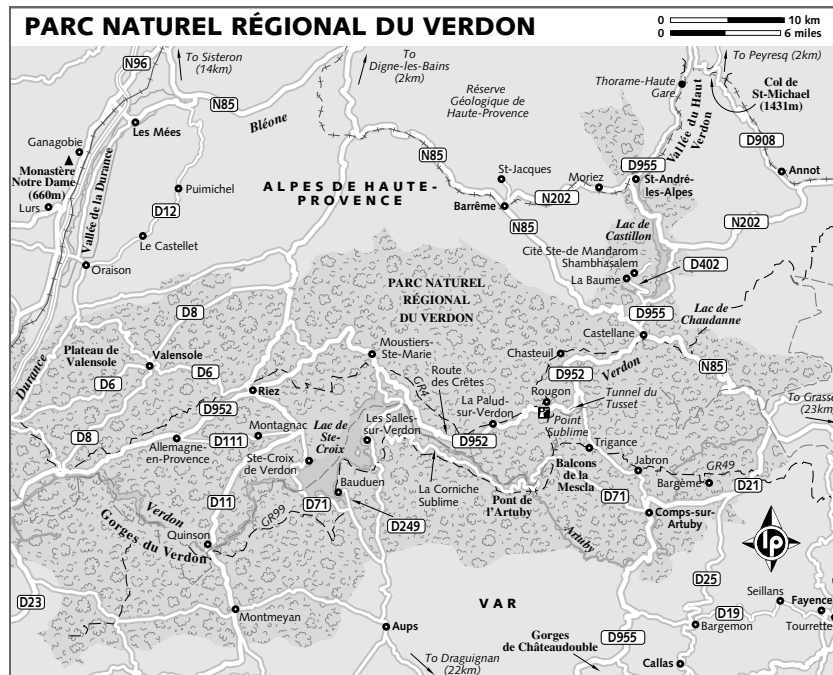
in regal shades such as rich, royal blue and furnished with heavy, dark timber furniture and drapes. Breakfast is provided for stays of three or more nights. In spring and autumn, the five-room caretakers cottage, with a full kitchen and an open fireplace in the lounge room, can be rented starting from €600 per week for six people.

Hôtel Lac et Forêt (☎ 04 92 89 07 38; lacforet@dub-internet.fr; rte de Nice; d €40-46, menus €15-22; ☞ ☞) Looking like something from a children's picture book, this red-roofed chalet on the shores of Lac de Castillon has bright, spacious rooms with views of the lake – and of the paragliders from the neighbouring paragliding school dropping from the sky. The restaurant has a good kids menu (€9).

Domaine d'Aiguines (☎ 04 92 34 25 72; fax 04 92 34 29 09; St-Jacques; menus €20-26) Home to hundreds of the birds, this duck farm cooks up farm-made foie gras, pan-fried duck salad and other duck dishes. Follow the N202 for 13km west from St-André-les-Alpes and turn left (north) just before Barrême, along the narrow D118 to the hamlet of St-Jacques. Opening hours are variable, so don't just turn up on the off chance.

RÉSERVE GÉOLOGIQUE DE HAUTE-PROVENCE

Footprints of prehistoric birds, outsized ammonites and ram's horn spiral shells are among the amazing fossil deposits found throughout the 1900-sq-km Réserve Géologique de Haute-Provence. You'll need a detailed regional map or *topoguide* (sold at Digne-les-Bains' tourist



office) and your own transport to get to the 18 sites, most of which are found around **Barles** (population 114, 24km north of Digne) to the north and **Barrême** (population 442, 28km southeast) to the south. An impressive limestone slab with some 500 ammonites sits 3km north of Digne-les-Bains on the road to Barles. The reserve runs museums in Sisteron (p246) and Castellane (p236).

Find time to visit the fascinating **Centre de Géologie** (☎ 04 92 36 70 70; www.resgeol04.org in French; Parc St-Benoît; adult/7-14yr €4.60/2.75; ☎ museum 9am-noon & 2-5.30pm Apr-Oct, 9am-noon & 2-5.30pm Mon-Thu, 9am-noon & 2-4.30pm Fri, closed Sat & Sun Nov-Mar, park 8am-7pm Apr-Oct, 8am-7pm Mon-Fri Nov-Mar) in St-Benoît, 2km north of Digne off the road to Barles. Trails lead to a museum containing aquariums, insect displays, and fossils and plants put into evolutionary context. Take TUD bus 2 from Digne to the Champourcin stop (across the bridge; €1), then follow the road to the left along the signposted 'Musée-Promenade', a dramatic 15-minute clamber up a rocky overhang above the river. Car access is restricted.

DIGNE-LES-BAINS

pop 17,680 / elev 608m

Both wild and cultivated lavender carpet the mountains and plains around Digne-les-Bains, which celebrates the annual lavender harvest with a fragrant festival in August.

Resting at the foot of the Alps, Digne is named for its curative thermal springs, which are visited annually by around 11,000 people seeking cures for rheumatism and other ailments.

In addition to the Réserve Géologique de Haute-Provence's fossil-rich shale, the town has a couple of top museums.

Orientation

Digne hugs the eastern bank of the shallow River Bléone. The major roads into town converge at the Point Rond du 11 Novembre 1918 roundabout, 400m northeast of the train station. The main street, *blvd Gassendi*, heads northeastwards from the Point Rond and passes the large *place du Général de Gaulle*, the main square.

Information

INTERNET ACCESS

Cybercafé (☎ 04 92 32 00 19; 48 rue de l'Hubac; per hr €5; ☎ 10am-noon & 2-7pm Tue-Sat) In the centre of town.

LAUNDRY

There are laundrettes, one at 4 *place du Marché* in the old city (open 8am to 7pm Monday to Saturday) and the other at 99 *blvd Gassendi* (open 9am to 7pm).

TOURIST INFORMATION

Relais Départemental des Gîtes de France (☎ 04 92 31 30 40; www.gites-de-france.com; ☎ 9am-noon & 1-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon Sat) Adjacent to the tourist office. Can book *gîtes* in the area from 9am to 11am and 1pm to 4pm.

Tourist office (☎ 04 92 36 62 62; www.ot-dignelesbains.fr; place du Tampinet; ☎ 8.45am-12.30pm & 1.30-6.30pm Jul & Aug, 8.45am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Sat, 10am-noon Sun Sep-Jun) Provides comprehensive regional info including walking and cycling maps; runs seasonal half-day guided tours in English to the lavender distillery in Mézel (€7) by appointment.

Sights

It's worth darting into the **Cathédrale Notre-Dame du Bourg** (av du Camping) at the eastern end of town. Built between the 12th and 13th centuries, it has a simple, clean-cut Romanesque interior and contains some unusual painted murals.

MUSÉE ALEXANDRA DAVID-NÉEL

Tibetan culture is celebrated at the **Fondation Alexandra David-Néel** (☎ 04 92 31 32 38; www.alexandra-david-neel.org; 27 av Maréchal Juin; admission free), in memory of the Paris-born writer and philosopher who made an incognito voyage in the 1900s to Tibet before settling in Digne. Year-round, free two-hour tours (available in English) commence at 10am, 2pm and 3.30pm. Drive 1km along the Nice road or take bus 3 to the Stade Rolland stop.

MUSÉE GASSENDI

Everything from modern art by Andy Goldsworthy to still lifes by 19th-century painter Etienne Martin, natural history, and exhibits on the 16th-century philosopher-scientist-painter Pierre Gassendi are displayed at the **Musée Gassendi** (☎ 04 92 31 45 29; place des Récollets; adult/child €4/2; ☎ 11am-7pm Apr-Sep, 1.30-5.30pm Wed-Mon Oct-Mar) in the town centre.

Activities

Ahhh...float in the thermal pool, slather yourself in mud and seaweed or luxuriate in a lavender bath at **Établissement Thermal** (☎ 04 92 32 32 92; www.eurothermes.com in French; ☎ Feb-early

DONKEY DISCOVERY

Ramble through the lavender-strewn mountains with a donkey from **Lambert Âne** (☎ 04 92 31 60 37; www.lambertane.com; Le Château-Lambert), in the hamlet of La Robine-sur-Galabre, 31km northeast of Thoard, or **Poivre d'Âne** (☎ 04 92 34 87 12; poivre.ane.free.fr; La Bastide des Férauds), northwest of Digne in Thoard.

To discover more about these endearing creatures, Lambert offers **farm visits** (€6.50 to €7.50) where you learn about their breeding and can ask questions during afternoon tea made from farm produce. At Poivre you can stay on the donkey farm in *chambre d'hôte* rooms (double from €51; breakfast €4.70) and feast on farm-fresh tables d'hôtes (€15.50).

Donkey hire starts from €44/80 per one/two days.

Dec), 2km east of Digne's centre. A 20-minute spa or massage starts at €45.

Rando Lavande (☎ 04 92 32 27 44; www.chez.com/randolavande in French; 7 rue de Provence) organises customised walks through the mountains' wild lavender in summer and snowshoeing expeditions in winter (from €20 per person per day).

Festivals & Events

For more than 50 years the five-day **Corso de la Lavande**, starting on the first weekend of August, has heralded the lavender harvest. Musicians flock to town, colourful floats parade through the streets and torch-lit celebrations continue into the night.

The **Journées Tibétaines** (Tibetan Days), an annual celebration of Tibetan culture, is held at the Musée Alexandra David-Néel over three days in August.

Sleeping & Eating

Many of Digne's hotels require half-board in July and August. France's first *gîte* was founded here in 1951; the Relais Départemental des Gîtes de France's headquarters (opposite) has a list of locations.

Hôtel de Provence (☎ 04 92 31 32 19; www.hotel-alpes-provence.com; rte des Thermes; d €43-50, tr €58-60, q €70-72; ☎ ☎) There is only a handful of private parking places for guests at this cheerful Provençal hotel framed by window boxes, but there's plenty of public parking is available nearby. A terracotta-tiled staircase leads to rooms with brightly printed fabrics, and there's an outdoor terrace to soak up the sunshine.

Hôtel du Golf (☎ 04 92 30 58 00; www.golfdigne.com; 57 route du Chaffaut; d €45-68, menus €13-25; ☎ restaurant open lunch year-round, dinner Jul & Aug; ☎ ☎) Swing a club through fields of lavender. A well-signed 8km southwest of Digne, this resort takes the so-called 'good walk spoiled' très seriously,

with packages combining accommodation, dining and golf, multistage lessons, and golf buggy and GPS rental. Rooms are modern, utilitarian arrangements; there's a relaxed restaurant and bar for a postgame pastis.

Hôtel Villa Gaïa (☎ 04 92 31 21 60; www.hotelvilla.gaia.fr; 24 rte de Nice; d €85-95, menus €26-39; ☎ Apr-Oct; ☎) Set in Italianate fountained gardens, this antique-filled 19th-century villa 2km west of town still feels like the private mansion it once was, complete with a tennis court, flowing lounge and guest rooms, a library and a grand dining room.

Also recommended:

Hôtel L'Origan (☎ /fax 04 92 31 62 13; 6 rue Pied de Ville; d €25-35, menus €20-40; ☎ restaurant closed Tue) Great for travellers watching their centimes, with cheap, charmingly comfy rooms and a first-rate regional restaurant.

Hôtel Central (☎ 04 92 31 31 91; www.lhotel-central.com; 26 *blvd Gassendi*; d €47-57) Overlooking Digne's main café strip (so street rooms can be noisy), with wood-beamed rooms, colourful quilts and accommodating staff.

SELF-CATERING

On Wednesday and Saturday mornings, *place du Général de Gaulle* overflows with fresh market produce.

The bevy of bakeries in town includes **Boulangerie Pâtisserie Andre Michel** (16 rue Pied de Ville).

Getting There & Around

BICYCLE

Gallardo (☎ 04 92 31 05 29; 8 cours des Arès; ☎ 9am-noon & 3-7pm Tue-Sat) rents bikes (€15 per day).

BUS

The **bus station** (☎ 04 92 31 50 00; place du Tampinet; ☎ 9am-12.30pm & 3-6.30pm Mon-Sat) is behind the tourist office. Destinations include Nice (2½ hours, Monday, Tuesday, Friday and Saturday) via Castellane (1¼ hours), Marseille (2½ hours) and Apt (two hours, Monday to Saturday).

THE PERFUME OF PROVENCE

If Provence has a defining colour, it's purple; and a defining fragrance, it's the astringent aroma of lavender (*lavande*), which flowers for a month prior to harvesting between approximately mid-June and mid-August, depending on the region. Some of the most spectacular fields include those surrounding Abbaye de Sénanque near Gordes, the vast farms sweeping the Plateau de Valensole, and those strewing the arid Sault region.

The aromatic flowers are mechanically harvested in full bloom between 15 July and 15 August on a hot, dry day. Lorry-loads of cut lavender, known as *paille* (straw), are packed tightly in a steam still and distilled to extract the essential oils.

Authentic lavender farms, all the rage in the 1920s, are a dying breed today. Since the 1950s *lavandin* (lavendin) – a hybrid of fine lavender and aspic, cloned at the turn of the 20th century – has been mass produced for industrial purposes. Both blaze the same vibrant purple, but *lavandin* yields five times more oil than fine lavender (which produces 1kg of oil from 130kg of cut straw). Since 1997 *huile essentielle de lavande de Haute-Provence* – essential lavender oil from Haute-Provence – has been protected by its own *appellation d'origine contrôlée* (AOC).

Approximately 80% of Provence's 400 lavender farms now produce *lavandin*. The few remaining traditional lavender farms – like Château du Bois (see p226) – usually colour higher areas. Wild lavender needs an altitude of 900m to 1300m to blossom (unlike *lavandin*, which sprouts anywhere above 800m) and its more concentrated essences linger longer. Some 80% of essential oils produced in the region's 150 distilleries is exported.

A list of lavender farms, distilleries and scented gardens open to visitors feature in the free brochure *Les Routes de la Lavande: La Provence par les Sens* (The Lavender Roads: Experiencing Provence through the Five Senses), also available in English from tourist offices or the association **Les Routes de la Lavande** (☎ 04 75 26 65 91; www.routes-lavande.com). In Thoard, 20km northwest of Digne-les-Bains, the old-fashioned **Distillerie du Siron** (☎ 04 92 34 80 33; Quartier le Gazon) offers free guided tours between late July and late August from 10am to noon and 2pm to 5pm on Tuesday, Thursday and at weekends, and sells lavender year-round.

Lavender can be tasted throughout Provence in various guises, including in ice cream, chocolate and honey, and several restaurants offer lavender *menus*.

Festivals take place in Valensole (3rd Sunday in July), Sault (15 August), and Digne-les-Bains and Valréas (both first weekend in August).

During the ski season and in July and August, two or three buses a week also travel to La Foux d'Allos (two hours); while **Société des Cars Alpes Littoral** (SCAL; ☎ 04 92 51 06 05; www.scal-amv-voyages.com in French) runs a daily bus in either direction between Marseille and Pra Loup (4½ hours) via Digne-les-Bains (2¼ hours) and Barcelonnette (four hours).

TRAIN

Digne's **train station** (☎ 04 92 31 00 67; av Pierre Sémar; ☎ ticket windows 8.15am–12.30pm & 1–8pm Mon–Fri, 8.15am–12.30pm & 1.45–4.45pm Sat) is a 10-minute walk west of the tourist office. There are daily services to Marseille (€22, 2¼ hours).

Digne-les-Bains is the northern terminus of the **Chemins de Fer de Provence** (☎ /fax 04 92 31 01 58; www.trainprovence.com; av Pierre Sémar), which links Digne to Nice via a scenic, narrow-gauge mountain railway. See opposite for highlights.

NORTH OF DIGNE-LES-BAINS

Like a little swatch of Switzerland, the **Vallée de la Blanche** (www.valleedelablanche.com), 50km north of Digne, has more than 110km of ski runs split between three resorts. The main one, well set up for families with amenities including a crèche, is the 1350m **St-Jean Montclar**. Its **tourist office** (☎ 04 92 30 92 01; www.montclar.com; ☎ call for seasonal opening times) is adjacent to the ski station. The area is the home of Montclar spring water, but you won't need to buy it while you're here – just turn on the tap.

Ski passes for St-Jean Montclar's slopes cost €16 to €18.50 per day. One of the sweetest *chambres d'hôtes* is **Les Alisiers** (☎ 04 92 35 30 88; fax 04 92 35 02 72; d incl breakfast €48–52, apt €53; ☎ closed mid–Nov–mid–Dec), 800m past the ski station on your left; with views over the snowy fields from your toasty-warm bed and half-board options.

Between late December and March, there is a bus service from Gap (€11, 45 minutes), which is 47km northwest of here in the Hautes-Alpes; the rest of the year it's best reached by your own wheels.

VALLÉE DE LA DURANCE

At the western edge of Haute-Provence, the impetuous waters of the 324km-long River Durance, an affluent of the Rhône, follow the Via Domitia, the road from Italy that allowed the Romans to infiltrate the whole of France.

The Durance Valley ploughs southwest from Sisteron to the western side of Parc

Naturel Régional du Verdon. The three main towns along this 100km stretch are Manosque, on the eastern edge of the Luberon (see p229); industrial **Château-Arnoux St-Auban** (population 5000) with its 16th-century castle on the confluence of the Rivers Durance and Bléone; and Sisteron.

SISTERON

pop 7232 / elev 485m

Sweeping views of Sisteron can be seen from its **citadel**, an imposing 3rd- to 16th-century fortress perched on a rock above the *cluse* (transverse valley), which was strengthened by Vauban in the 18th century to guard against neighbouring Savoy. Open-air classical-music

ALONG THE MOUNTAIN RAILWAY

Chugging between the mountains and the sea, narrow-gauge railway *le Train des Pignes* (the pine cone train) is one of Provence's most picturesque trips. Conceived in 1861 and fully inaugurated in 1911, the line was initially serviced by steam train, which still puffs between Puget and Annot in summer. Endearing theories abound (such as pine cones falling into the train one Christmas Eve when it had run out of coal), but no one knows the history behind the name.

Rising to 1000m altitude, with breathtaking views, the 151km track passes through 50 tunnels and over 16 viaducts and 15 metal bridges on its precipitous journey, stopping at villages en route. You can buy direct tickets to the place you want to visit or, if you're travelling the whole route, it's possible to hop out, explore, and join a later train. From Digne-les-Bains, highlights include:

St-André-les-Alpes (€6.60, 50 minutes; see p241)

Thorame-Haute (€8.20, one hour; population 174, elevation 1012m) Despite its pinprick size, this village is a vital bus link between southern Provence and the Allos ski resorts. After Thorame-Haute, the **Col de St-Michel** (1431m) and the ancient shepherds village of Peyresq flash past. The 3.5km-long tunnel here took 400 workers some two years to construct.

Annot (€9, one hour 25 minutes; population 1020, elevation 700m) This sweet old town has a couple of interesting 17th-century chapels, both a short walk from the village. The **tourist office** (☎ 04 92 83 23 03; www.annot.fr in French; blvd St-Pierre) has details.

Entrevaux (€11.15, one hour 50 minutes; population 752, elevation 515m) The 17th-century fortified village tumbles dramatically down the hillside from a Vauban-built citadel. Across the drawbridge is an oil and flour mill that can be visited. The **tourist office** (☎ 04 93 05 46 73; tourisme@entrevaux.info) is inside the old city gate.

Puget-Théniers (€12.15, one hour 55 minutes; population 1624, elevation 405m) The 1909 steam locomotive that gave *le Train des Pignes* its name is stationed here: from May to October it shunts between Puget and Annot (€6.80 return, 50 minutes). Passengers with appetites fired up by the fresh mountain air should disembark for **Edelweiss** (☎ 04 90 05 01 00; 1 place Adolphe Cornil; menus from €25; ☎ lunch & dinner Thu–Tue Apr–Oct, lunch Thu–Tue, dinner Fri & Sat Nov–Mar) where Christian Recanzone cooks up succulent mountain lamb in lavender pastry. Puget also has a *via ferrata* (see p253).

Touët-sur-Var (€13.20, two hours 10 minutes; population 445) Another stop for gourmands, the perched village's **Auberge des Chasseurs** (☎ 04 93 05 71 11; menus €33–41; ☎ lunch Wed–Sun, dinner Tue–Sun, closed mid–Dec–Mar) is renowned for its seasonal game dishes, especially wild boar. Other treats include a terrine of foie gras with homemade mango chutney.

The entire trip from Digne to Nice takes 3¼ hours (€17.65). There are four to five trains daily. A discount of 20% is available for students, and 50% for children under 12. Bicycles cannot be taken onto the train, but are sent as baggage (€8); contact the railway for information.

Updated schedules are on Chemins de Fer de Provence's website at www.trainprovence.com.

concerts during the **Festival des Nuits de la Citadelle** (Citadel Nights Festival; www.francefestivals.com/sisteron/indexuk.htm; tickets €36-45) are held here from mid-July to mid-August. The **tourist office** (☎ 04 92 61 12 03; www.sisteron.com; Hôtel de Ville; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Sat, 10am-1pm Sun mid-Jul-mid-Aug, 9am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Sat mid-Aug-Nov & May-mid-Jul, 9am-noon & 2-5pm Mon-Sat Nov-Apr) has information on visiting the citadel, and also conducts 1½-hour walking tours of the town in July and August (€1).

Time is the essence of the **Musée Terre et Temps** (Museum of Earth & Time; ☎ 04 92 61 61 30; www.resgeol04.org in French; 6 place Général de Gaulle; ☎ 10am-1pm & 3-7pm Jul & Aug, 9.30am-12.30pm & 2-6pm Thu-Mon Apr-Jun, Sep & Oct), inside a former 17th-century chapel. One of a trio of museums (see also Musée Sirènes et Fossiles, p236, and Centre de Géologie, p242) run by the Réserve Géologique de Haute-Provence, time-honoured displays include a Foucault's Pendulum, sundials and a miraculous water clock.

From the museum, motorists can follow the rte du Temps (Time Rd), a marked itinerary along the eastbound D3 to remote **St-Geniez**, from where it climbs over the Col de Font-Belle (1708m) before swooping south to the medieval fortified village of **Thoard** and Digne-les-Bains. Information panels en route highlight geological sights.

AROUND SISTERON

In **Les Méés** (population 2973), 20km south of Sisteron, is the **Rocher des Méés**, a row of rocky pinnacles that stand 100m tall. They were once a gaggle of monks who were turned to stone for lustful after Saracen women, so legend claims.

Ten kilometres south again in **Ganagobie**, the 10th-century Benedictine **Prieuré de Ganagobie** (☎ 04 92 68 00 04; www.ndganagobie.com in French; ☎ 3-5pm Tue-Sun) showcases an exquisite 12th-century floor mosaic – the largest of its kind in France – in its chapel (the only section of the monastery open to visitors).

Heading 26km west of Sisteron in a secluded valley, the fabulous **ferme auberge Danse L'Ombre** (☎ 04 92 62 05 86; Les Remises, Curel; plat du jour €12, menu €22; ☎ by reservation) creates organic feasts from farm-raised meats and farm-grown vegetables and fruits including strawberries, raspberries, apples and pears. Musical-theatrical nights are held on Saturdays (€25). A sign directs you to the farm in the little hamlet of Curel, 200m off the D946 to your left.

PAYS DE FORCALQUIER

Less than a dozen kilometres northeast of its much more famous western neighbour, the Luberon, Pays de Forcalquier (Forcalquier country) is delightfully off mass tourism's radar. The area shelters sweet hilltop villages, wildflower-strewn countryside and gastronomic treats.

Forcalquier

pop 5000 / elev 550m

At the heart of Pays de Forcalquier, the town that bears its name sits atop a rocky perch 19km southwest of Ganagobie. Steep steps lead to the citadel and octagon-shaped chapel at the top of the village, where **carillon concerts** are held most Sundays from 11.30am to 12.30pm.

France's only heritage-listed **cemetery** (place du Souvenir Français; ☎ 9am-6pm) lies 1km north of the centre, distinguished by its age-old yew trees cut to form high, decorative alleys.

Fiery liqueurs such as Bigarade (bitter orange), La Farigoule (thyme), **amandine** (almond) and pastis (see p50) have been distilled at the Distilleries et Domaines de Provinces since 1898. Taste and buy at its **Espace Dégustation** (☎ 04 92 75 15 41; www.distilleries-provence.com in French; 9 av St-Promasse; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Sat, 9am-noon Sun Jul & Aug, 9am-noon & 2-6pm Mon & Wed-Sat Sep-Jun).

You can also sample local aperitifs at a table d'hôte meal at **Le Lapin Tant Pis** (☎ 04 92 75 38 88; info@lecomptoirdespoivres.com; 10 av St-Promasse; menu €58; ☎ dinner Mon-Sat Jul & Aug, by appointment Sep-Jun), in the atelier of chef and spice-gatherer Gérard Vives. He feeds a maximum of 15 diners, so make sure you book ahead; credit cards are not accepted. To spice up your own cooking, pop into Monsieur Vives' adjoining spice shop.

Taste and stock up on the AOC Haute-Provence olive-oil harvest at **Oliviers & Co** (☎ 04 92 75 00 75; 5 rue des Cordeliers; menus around €18), a shop that dishes up light Mediterranean cuisine in the adjoining bistro.

The **tourist office** (☎ 04 92 75 10 02; www.forcalquier.com; 13 place du Bourguet; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon, 9am-12.30pm & 2-7pm Tue-Sat, 10am-1pm & 3-6pm Sun mid-Jun-mid-Sep, 9am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Sat mid-Sep-mid-Jun) has information about atmospheric eating and sleeping options throughout Pays de Forcalquier.

Around Forcalquier

There are few more peaceful places in Provence than the 13th-century priory **Prieuré**

A LAKESIDE DETOUR

Straddling the Haute-Provence-Hautes-Alpes border, Europe's largest manmade lake, **Lac de Serre-Ponçon**, sits high in the mountains. Created between 1955 and 1961 to avoid flooding from the River Durance, which caused severe loss of life in the mid-19th century, the lake's construction saw the village of Savines demolished and drowned. The 'replacement' village, **Savines Le Lac**, now sits on the lake's eastern bank overlooking a flotilla of summer sailboats. The lake now seems as if it's been here as long as the mountains surrounding it.

The lake district's main town, **Embrun** (population 6700, elevation 870m), 10km north of Savines Le Lac, was the Roman capital of the Alps and later a bishopric. Its enchanting tangle of cobblestone streets lead to the dramatic black-and-white stone cathedral **Notre Dame du Réal**, which presides 80m above the lake. In town, pack a lakeside picnic from the homemade farm produce at **La Ferme Embrunaise** (☎ 04 92 43 01 98; place Barthelon; ☎ 7.30am-12.30pm & 3-7pm Tue-Sat); and the **chocolatier-pâtisserie** of **Luc Eyriey** (☎ 04 92 43 01 37; place Barthelon; 8.30am-noon & 3-7pm Tue-Sat, 8.30am-noon Sun), run by his family since 1902. Luc has also opened a small onsite **chocolate museum**. Within a 15th-century Franciscan convent, Embrun's **tourist office** (☎ 04 92 43 72 72; www.ot-embrun.fr in French; place Général Dossé; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Sat, 9.30am-noon & 4-7pm Sun Jul & Aug, 9am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Sat Sep-Jun) has information on a raft of lake and river water sports.

Hidden deep in the forest, 3km uphill from the lake's eastern bank, the beautiful 12th-century **Abbaye de Boscodon** (☎ 04 92 43 14 45; Crots; admission €3.50; ☎ 8.30am-7pm Mon-Sat, 12.15-7pm Sun) fell to ruin and was inhabited by sheep; it has been magnificently resurrected by the community. Next to the abbey, **Le Cellier des Moines** (☎ 04 92 43 00 50; www.gite-boscodon.com in French; d incl breakfast €45-55, menu €21; ☎) has **chambre d'hôte** rooms and shared outdoor tables where meals are served in summer (there's a snug dining room for when it snows). Heading towards Embrun from Savines Le Lac, take the first road on your right.

Other enticing spots to sojourn while exploring the area include **Relais des Ecrins** (☎ 04 92 43 22 01; www.relaisdesecrins.com; Châteaoux-les-Alpes; d €39-46, menu €14; ☎), a charming blue-shuttered village inn 7km north of Embrun, and **Les Peupliers** (☎ 04 92 43 03 47; www.hotel-les-peupliers.com; chemin de Lesdier, Baratier; d €50-57, menus €19-24; ☎), 3km south of Embrun, with dishes such as local trout in pine-tree liqueur with fennel and sweet red peppers. Just nearby is the wonderful farm-maison d'hôte **La Fernande** (☎ 04 92 43 81 13; www.gdf05.com in French; champ Rambaud, Baratier; d incl breakfast €64; ☎ May-Nov; ☎), with four sunlit rooms, homemade apple juice, organic tables d'hôtes (€22) and the chance to experience life on a working farm. Embrun's tourist office has information on lakeside camping.

Lake Serre-Ponçon flows into the Ubaye valley. Embrun is 16km north of Col de Pontis, and has a train station with connections to Marseille.

de Salagon (☎ 04 92 75 70 50; www.musee-de-salagon.com in French; adult/12-18yr €6/3.60; ☎ 10am-7pm Jun-Aug, 10.30am-12.30pm & 2-6.30pm May & Sep, 2-5pm Oct & Feb-Apr, 2-5pm Sun Nov & Dec, closed Jan), 4km south of Forcalquier in Mane. A multilanguage audioguide lets you ramble at your own pace through the romantic herbs grown in a medieval garden, Provençal perfumes such as lavender, mint, mugwort and sage in its Jardin de Senteurs, a medicinal garden, and a showcase of plants from around the world. Crumbling stone buildings house permanent exhibitions on metal work and lavender.

For a curative little DIY detour, continue a further 800m south of Mane, then turn right for 3km along a bumpy dirt track to the **Église de Châteauneuf**, a remote, centuries-old church

on the hillside where the *prêtre* (priest) can concoct a natural remedy for any ailments you might have from his rambling herb garden (you'll need to stop back the next day once he's prepared them). A customised concoction costs around €5. Midmorning is usually a good time to try popping by. Locals swear the cures – for anything from hay fever to arthritis – work wonders.

The scents of the region can be re-created when you get home by way of candles, scented water and mists, incense, essential oils and more at the factory of **Terre d'Oc** (☎ 04 92 79 40 20; www.terredoccreations.com; Zone Artisanale, Ville-neuve; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Sat), 13km southeast of Forcalquier in Villeneuve, where everything including packaging is done by hand.

A bunch of villages peeks at Forcalquier from the hilltops west of town: **Vachères** (population 260, elevation 830m), 30km west; **Oppedette** (population 40, elevation 525m) with its lovely gorges crossed by the GR4; **Lurs** (population 381, elevation 600m); and **Simiane-la-Rotonde** (population 532), host to the international music festival **Les Riches Heures Musicales** in August. Tickets (€26) are sold at Forcalquier's tourist office.

ST-MICHEL L'OBSERVATOIRE

The **Observatoire de Haute-Provence** (☎ 04 92 70 64 00; www.obs-hp.fr) is a national research centre situated 10km southwest of Forcalquier at the end of the D305 from the village of **St-Michel l'Observatoire**. It can be visited by a 30-minute **guided tour** (☎ 04 92 76 69 09; adult/6-12yr €2.50/1.50; 🕒 tours 2-4pm Wed Jul & Aug, 3pm Wed Oct-Mar); buy tickets from the **billetterie** (ticket office) in the village square. Shuttle buses run every 30 minutes from St-Michel l'Observatoire (2km), which operates a small tourist office from Monday to Friday in July and August.

From St-Michel l'Observatoire, the east-bound D5 flashes past **Centre d'Astronomie** (☎ 04 92 76 69 69; www.centre-astro.fr in French; Plateau du Moulin à Vent), an astronomy centre that organises star-filled multimedia events and educational workshops. Learn how to **watch stars** (adult/6-16yr €8.75/7; 🕒 9pm Fri & Sat Jul & Aug) with the naked eye and telescopes.

Accommodation and food are available in St-Michel l'Observatoire at the friendly **Hôtel-Restaurant l'Observatoire** (☎ /fax 04 92 76 63 62; place de la Fontaine; s/d €41/49, menu €25; 🍽 restaurant lunch Tue-Sun, dinner Tue-Sat, closed late Oct-early Nov). The rooms, decorated in warm Provençal colours, are welcoming, the food is great and there's a little bar where you can eavesdrop on the latest village gossip.

Getting There & Around

Buses leave from the **Sisteron bus station** (☎ 04 92 61 22 18) to and from Aix-en-Provence (2½ hours, four daily), Marseille (two hours, four daily) and Nice (3¾ hours, one daily) via Digne-les-Bains (45 minutes).

In Forcalquier, **Voyages Brémont** (☎ 04 92 75 16 32) and **Autocars Sumian** (☎ 04 91 49 44 25) run buses to and from Marseille (two hours, up to five daily). Voyages Brémont also runs buses to Manosque (30 minutes, three per day Monday to Saturday, one Sunday). Daily services to and from Avignon (two hours) and

AUTHOR'S CHOICE

Relais d'Elle (☎ 04 92 75 06 87; www.relai-delle.com; rte de la Brillane, Niozelles; s/d/tr/q incl breakfast from €46/53/68/96, table d'hôte €20; 🍷 🍴 🚰 🚰) In the midst of flowering fields of bright red poppies, this beautiful stone farmhouse has five *chambre d'hôte* rooms worthy of inclusion in a home-décor magazine, horses stabled in the paddocks for riding, a trellised terrace for breakfast and a deliciously cool swimming pool. But the highlight, without doubt, is the lively tables d'hôtes at the long dark timber table in the cosy dining room, in the company of dynamic hosts, ex-Parisian Catherine (who creates the superb meals from scratch), her husband, lifelong Pays de Forcalquier resident Jacky, and their companionable *chien*, Sam.

Digne-les-Bains (one hour) are by **Barlatier** (☎ 04 32 76 00 40). All buses leave from the stop on place Martial Sicard, except on Monday when (because of the market) they depart from in front of the cathedral.

St-Michel l'Observatoire is accessible by one bus a day between Monday and Saturday from Manosque (30 minutes) and Forcalquier (15 minutes).

PARC NATIONAL DU MERCANTOUR

Ringed by a roller coaster of rugged mountains, the Mercantour National Park is Provence at its most majestic. Europe's highest mountain pass, **Col de Restefond la Bonette** (2802m), coils through the Vallée de l'Ubaye, the park's most northerly and wildest area. Ski trails crisscross the Vallées l'Ubaye, du Haut Verdon and de la Tinée. A short hop from the Côte d'Azur, the Vallées de la Vesubie, des Merveilles and de la Roya range around gorges, ageless rocks and white waters.

The Parc National du Mercantour is home to a dazzling array of birds, including the golden eagle and the bearded vulture. Its higher-altitude plains shelter marmot, mouflon and chamois (a mountain antelope), as well as the *bouquetin* (Alpine ibex), reintroduced into the region in the early 1990s. In

lower wooded areas, red and roe deer are common. Wild boar roam throughout, and wolves (see p250) are prowling the park once more.

Camping in the park is not allowed.

Orientation

The park's uninhabited heart covers 685 sq km in the northeast of the region and embraces six valleys: (northwest to southeast) Ubaye, Haut Verdon, Tinée, Vesubie, Merveilles and Roya. The park abuts Italy's Parco Naturale delle Alpi Marittime to the east and is surrounded by a 1465-sq-km partially protected and inhabited peripheral zone.

Information

The park's headquarters are in Nice (p268). Permanent Parc National du Mercantour **Maison du Parc** (www.parc-mercantour.fr) offices are in several locations; see information sections for details. All provide detailed information on all aspects of the park and sell maps and guides. Tourist offices in the park's towns also have information.

VALLÉE DE L'UBAYE

Desolate and wild, the Ubaye Valley stretches between the Parc Régional du Queyras (north) and the Parc National du Mercantour (south). Winter skiing and summer white-water rafting are its two main activities. The valley is crossed by the D900, which closely shadows the banks of the River Ubaye.

The valley's only town, **Barcelonnette** (population 3300, elevation 1135m), has a fascinating Mexican heritage, resulting in some exceptional, very unalpine architecture. From the 18th century until WWII, some 5000 Barcelonnetais emigrated to Mexico to seek their fortunes in the silk- and wool-weaving industries, building mansions

A CHEESY DETOUR

In the literal sense only. For fabulously authentic *fromage* (cheese), follow the D950 25km northwest from Forcalquier to **Banon** (population 940, elevation 760m), renowned for its *chèvre de Banon* cheese, made from goats milk and wrapped in chestnut leaves. The **Fromagerie de Banon** (☎ 04 92 73 25 03; www.fromages-provence.com; rte de Camiol) sells its cheeses at the Tuesday-morning market on place de la République and at the wonderful cheese-and-sausage shop **Chez Melchio** (☎ 04 92 73 23 05; place de la République; 🕒 7.30am-12.30pm & 2.30-7pm Wed-Sun). Banon's **tourist office** (☎ 04 92 73 36 37; banon.accueil@wanadoo.fr; place de la République; 🕒 9am-12.30pm & 3-6pm Tue-Sat year-round, also 10am-noon Sun Jul & Aug) has a list of farms in the surrounding countryside where you can sample fresh cheese. In May the town celebrates its annual **Fête du Fromage** (Cheese Fair).

STAR-SPANGLED SCREENINGS

Summer nights in Haute-Provence see on-screen stars compete with the multitude of stars in the clear night sky during outdoor screenings hosted by a clutch of villages, including Annot, Allemagne-en-Provence, Banon, Castellane, Forcalquier, Moustiers Ste-Marie and Ste-Croix de Verdon. The most breathtaking venue is the Centre d'Astronomie (opposite), near St-Michel l'Observatoire, which features sci-fi flicks.

Screenings start at 9.30pm and cost €4.

Le Cinéma de Pays (☎ 04 92 78 13 25; cinepays.free.fr in French) runs the Nuits du Cinéma en Plein Air programme; schedules are available online.

throughout the town upon their return. One of the most spectacular now houses the **Musée de la Vallée** (☎ 04 92 81 27 15; musee.vallee@wanadoo.fr; 10 av de la Libération; adult/under 18yr €3.30/1.80; 🕒 10am-noon & 3-7pm mid-Jul-Aug, 3-6pm Tue-Sat Jun-mid-Jul & Sep, 2.30-6pm Wed-Sat Oct-mid-Nov & mid-Dec-May), which unravels and explores the town's colourful history.

Information

Barcelonnette's **tourist office** (☎ 04 92 81 04 71; www.barcelonnette.net in French; place Frédéric Mistral; 🕒 9am-noon & 2-7pm Jul & Aug, 9am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Sat Sep-Jun) is a fount of local info.

Stay connected on the town's free wi-fi network (a rarity for Provence).

Activities

CYCLING

The Vallée de l'Ubaye is linked to the outside world by seven mountain passes. Cyclists tough enough to conquer them all, including Col de Restefond la Bonette, are given

SHADES OF GREY

Sustained hunting over 1000 years led to the eventual disappearance of wolves from France in 1930. But in 1992 two 'funny-looking dogs' were spotted in the Parc National du Mercantour near Utelle. Since then wolves have been making a natural return, loping across the Alps from Italy; there are now upwards of 30 in the park. Summer leaf coverage makes them hard to spot and in warmer weather they usually pad back to Italy.

The grey wolf (*canis lupus*) is something of a misnomer: its thick, furry coat also comes in shades of black, red, tawny, cinnamon and white. It lives for around 10 years, in packs of two to 12 animals. Howling is its most dramatic form of communication – the sound can travel for 16km in open spaces. As early ecologist Aldo Leopold (1887–1948) put it, 'Only the mountain has lived long enough to listen objectively to the howl of a wolf.'

Unlike the beasts of myth and fairy tales, the wolves are wary animals and will run in the opposite direction if they sniff you – although they do feed on sheep, to the bane of farmers and to the consternation of politicians trying to appease them as well as animal protectionists.

a medal; the Maison de la Vallée de l'Ubaye (below) in Barcelonnette has details.

In Le Martinet both white-water-sports bases (see right) rent mountain bikes (€8/26 per hour/day) and arrange guided rides. River has a mini mountain-bike (VT) course for kids, 20km of forest trails, 1.7km of downhill tracks and a 450m bicross (scramble) circuit for adult riders.

SKIING

Rising 8.5km southwest of Barcelonnette are the twin ski resorts of **Pra Loup 1500** (sometimes called Les Molanes) and **Pra Loup 1600** (which has more infrastructure and nightlife). Both are connected by a lift system with the ski resort of La Foux d'Allos. Pra Loup's 50 lifts are between 1600m and 2600m, with 180km of runs and a vertical drop of almost 1000m. In summer it's a hiker's heaven.

The Pra Loup **tourist office** (☎ 04 92 84 10 04; www.praloup.com; ☎ 9am-noon & 2-6pm Jul & Aug, 9am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Fri May, Jun & Sep-Nov, 9am-7pm Dec-Apr) and **École de Ski Français** (ESF; ☎ 04 92 84 11 05) are in Pra Loup 1600. Ski passes cost €26.50 per day.

WALKING

Barcelonnette's tourist office has a list of guides who organise walks and cycling and canoeing trips.

Alternatively, contact **Maison de la Vallée de l'Ubaye** (☎ 04 92 81 03 68; www.ubaye.com in French; 4 av des Trois Frères Arnaud, Barcelonnette). The walking and climbing organisation **Club Alpin Français** (☎ 04 92 81 28 18; www.cafubaye.com in French) shares its postal address, but is to be found at the back of the town hall (rue Mairie).

WHITE-WATER SPORTS

Canoe-rental places line the D900 between Le Lauzet-Ubaye and Barcelonnette. In Le Martinet, south off the D900, are **AN Rafting** (☎ 04 92 85 54 90; www.an-rafting.com in French; Pont du Martinet) and **River** (☎ 04 92 85 53 99; www.river.fr in French). Both arrange white-water activities, including two-to-three-hour rafting (€37), hot-dogging (€38) and canyoning (€42/60 per half-/full day) expeditions. Other operators charge similar rates.

Sleeping & Eating

In Méolans-Revel, 12km west of Barcelonnette, **Camping du Rioclar** (☎ 04 92 81 10 32; www.rioclar.com; av Georges Pompidou; 2 adults, tent & car €19; ☎ mid-Jun–mid-Sep; 📍) is close to the hamlet's water-sports centre.

The **maison d'hôte Domaine de Lara** (☎ 04 92 81 52 81; www.domainedelara.com; St-Pons de Barcelonnette; d incl breakfast €65-74; 📍), within a 16th-century *bastide* (country house) 2km northwest of Barcelonnette in St-Pons, has five Mexican-inspired guest rooms and a stunning raked timber ceiling in the lounge room. It serves piquant Mexican hot chocolate at breakfast.

In Pra Loup, studios and apartments start from around €190 per week in low season, climbing to €650 per week in peak ski season – the tourist office has lists. There's also a handful of hotels, such as the sloped-ceiling, storybook chalet, **Hôtel Le Prieuré** (☎ 04 92 84 11 43; www.prieure-praloup.com; Pra Loup 1500; d winter €60-90, menus €13-27; 📍), just across the road from the ski lift, with a restaurant serving alpine fare including fondue and steaming, thick-crust blueberry pie.

Barcelonnette's place **Manu** is ringed by restaurants.

Getting There & Around

The nearest train station is in Gap, 60km to the north; with connections to Marseille (three hours). Buses (usually a couple a day) travel to Pra Loup (1¼ hours) with a change in Barcelonnette.

From Barcelonnette, **Autocars SCAL** (☎ 04 92 81 00 20) runs one bus daily to and from Marseille (four hours) and Digne-les-Bains (1½ hours). During the ski season there's one daily direct bus between Pra Loup and Marseille (4½ hours).

Buses in the Vallée de l'Ubaye are run by **Autocars Maurel** (☎ 04 92 81 20 09). There are three Barcelonnette–Le Martinet buses a day and four daily shuttle buses between Barcelonnette and La Sauze. Shuttles between Le Sauze (3.5km south of Barcelonnette) and Super-Sauze (5km further south) are free.

VALLÉE DU HAUT VERDON

The dizzying **Col d'Allos** (2250m) links the Vallée de l'Ubaye with the Vallée du Haut Verdon. The mighty River Verdon has its source here at La Tête de la Sestrière (2572m).

Immediately beyond the mountain pass (snow-blocked in winter), 23.5km south of Pra Loup and connected to it by cable car, **La Foux d'Allos** (elevation 1800m) is stacked with concrete buildings and new-fangled timber chalets, but its glistening slopes are pristine. Its **tourist office** (☎ 04 92 83 02 81; www.valdallos.com) is in the Maison de la Foux on the main square. In the upper village you can ski out the front door of the **auberge de jeunesse** (☎ 04 92 83 81 08; la-foux-allos@fuaj.org; dm incl sheets €11; ☎ reception 8-10am & 7-8pm mid-Jun–mid-Sep, 8am-11pm Dec–mid-Apr).

A further 8km south on the D908, family-friendly **Allos** (population 650, elevation 1400m), with a crèche and children's activities, is just as deserted as La Foux d'Allos outside of

the ski season, except in July and August when hotels reopen their doors to walkers.

Between the two, 1.8km south of La Foux d'Allos and 5km north of Allos, mountain hospitality will warm your heart at the restored 16th-century working *ferme auberge* **La ferme Girerd-Potin** (☎ 04 92 83 04 76; www.chambredhotels-valdallos.com; rte de la Foux; half-board per person from €38, gîte prices by arrangement; 📍). Within rough-hewn stone walls, thaw out with hearty casseroles made from farm-raised poultry in the copper pot-lined dining room before an enormous roaring open fire; and snuggle up in three wood-beamed *chambre d'hôte* rooms (two with lofts), or a self-contained three-bedroom *gîte*.

To reach natural mountain lake **Lac d'Allos** (2226m), drive 12km to the end of the bumpy D226, then follow the 40-minute walking trail that leads to the lake from the car park. Route maps and walking information are available from the **Parc National du Mercantour hut** (☎ 06 32 90 80 24) that operates from the car park in July and August.

Lower in the valley is the Vauban-fortified village **Colmars-les-Alpes** (population 385, elevation 1250m). Colmars' maze of quaint streets is tethered between high thick walls, surrounded by magnificent mountainscapes. At the frontier of Savoy in the 14th century, today its Savoy fort can be visited via a little **museum** (place Joseph Girieud; adult/under 10yr €3/free; ☎ 10am-noon & 3-6.30pm Jul–mid-Sep). The **tourist office** (☎ 04 92 83 41 92; www.colmars-les-alpes.fr; Ancienne Auberge Fleurie; ☎ 9am-12.15pm & 2-5.45pm Mon-Sat Sep-Jun, 8am-12.30pm & 2-6.30pm Jul & Aug) has accommodation info.

Getting There & Away

In Colmars-les-Alpes, **Haut Verdon Voyages** (☎ 04 92 83 95 81) runs buses between Digne-les-Bains and La Foux d'Allos (two hours, one daily), stopping at St-André-les-Alpes, Thorame-Haute, Colmars and Allos.

AN ICY DETOUR

If you're averse to the cold, perish the thought. Hardy souls, however, can take the plunge to view frozen trout beneath the ice. **Aqua-Logis** (☎ 04 92 45 00 68; www.aqualogis.com; La Gravière, Ceillac; beginner €50; ☎ office 4-6pm), based in Ceillac, 39km north of St-Paul-sur-Ubaye, runs beginners ice diving during winter.

Diving (15 minutes) takes place at Lac Ste-Anne (2408m), where a hole is cut through the ice; skiers gain access by the Ste-Anne lift, while nonskiers can take the Girardin chairlift, then walk or snowshoe to the lake (1½ hours).

Ski rental and ski pass (€14/17 per half-/full day) aren't included in the price. As with regular diving, you'll need a medical certificate.

On Saturday during the ski season (usually mid-December to early April), direct shuttle buses link La Foux d'Allos with Nice and Marseille airports. You'll need to check fares and schedules, as they change every year.

The mountain railway (p245) from Nice to Digne stops at Thorame-Haute.

VALLÉE DE LA TINÉE

The **Col de Restefond la Bonette** (2802m) links Barcelonnette and the Vallée de l'Ubaye with the tamer, more southern Vallée de la Tinée. In winter, when the snowy pass is closed, the 149km-long valley can only be accessed up its southern leg from Nice. The narrow road (D2205) wiggles along the French-Italian border to **Isola** (875m), where it plunges sharply south towards the coast.

The steep D97 makes an eastbound climb to **Isola 2000** (elevation 2000m), a purpose-built ski resort from where the **Col de la Lombarde** (2350m) crosses into Italy.

Information

Parc National du Mercantour runs information centres in the valley in **Valberg** (☎ 04 93 02 58 23; rue Jean Mineur), **St-Sauveur-sur-Tinée** (☎ 04 93 02 10 33; 11 av des Blavets; ☹ Jul & Aug) and **St-Étienne de Tinée** (☎ 04 93 02 42 27; fax 04 93 02 41 33; quartier de l'Ardon; ☹ Jul & Aug).

Tourist offices in **Isola 2000** (☎ 04 93 23 15 15; www.isola2000.com; Galerie Marchande) and **Valberg** (☎ 04 93 23 24 25; www.valberg.com; place du Quartier) also stock information on various outdoor activities.

Sights & Activities

St-Étienne de Tinée (population 1684) is a lovely Alpine village 15km northwest of Isola village on the D2205. There are endless walking opportunities in summer around the **Cime de la Bonette** (2860m): contact the summer Maison du Parc National du Mercantour information centre (see above) for details. Thrill-seekers can scale new heights at the Via Ferrata La Traditionelle in Auron; see opposite.

South of Isola, the road twists through beautiful gorges to **St-Sauveur-sur-Tinée** (population 459, elevation 490m), a gateway to the Parc National du Mercantour.

From St-Sauveur-sur-Tinée, the spectacular D30 takes you 24km west to tiny **Beuil** (population 334, elevation 1450m), from where you can access the **Gorges du Cians**, carved from burgundy-coloured rock.

Mountain flora can be viewed in the **Arboretum Marcel Kroenlein** (☎ 04 93 57 38 02; fax 04 93 35 00 50; admission free) in Roure, a few hair-raising kilometres west of St-Sauveur off the D30. From the 1920s until 1961, villagers here used a 1850m-long cable to transport their milk and cheese down the mountain and their food provisions up – you can still see the cable today.

Further west is **Valberg** (elevation 1700m), a ski resort that lures walkers and mountain bikers in summer. At the **Espace Valberg Aventure** (☎ 04 93 23 24 25; ☹ Jul & Aug) you can scale trees, cross rope bridges and monkey around dozens more Tarzan-inspired obstacles; routes are graded yellow (ages four to 10; €10), green (beginner; €14, 1½ hours) and blue and red (advanced; €23, three hours). The forested site can be accessed via the Croix du Sapet chairlift; a single ride with/without mountain bike costs €4.10/3.60. Valberg also has a summer luge (one/three rides €3/8).

Guillaumes (elevation 800m), around 13km west of Valberg, is the starting point for forays into the **Gorges de Dalius**, which is chiselled from wine-coloured rock. Thrill-seekers can bungee jump with **Top Jump** (☎ 04 93 73 50 29; topjump.free.fr in French; €60; ☹ 1-5pm Jul & Aug, by reservation on Sun Apr-Jun & Sep) from Pont de la Mariée, an 80m-high stone footbridge across the gorges.

Pont de Berthéou, another bridge 8km south of Guillaumes on the D2202, is the starting point for the scenic **Sentier du Point Sublime** (4km, 1½ hours), an invigorating walk through oak and pine forest and past red rock formations to the panoramic 'sublime point'. Panels on the way interpret flora and fauna. Guillaumes' **tourist office** (☎ 04 93 05 52 73; www.pays-de-guillaumes.com in French; place Napoléon III; ☹ 9am-12.30pm & 1.30-5pm) has information – and a little online webcam so you can check the weather before you arrive.

Sleeping & Eating

Isola 2000 has a stack of flat-pack concrete hotels and apartment blocks.

Hôtel La Renaissance (☎ 04 93 05 59 89; www.hotelrenaissance.fr; 3 place Napoléon; d €35-50, menu €17; ☹ closed mid-Nov-Dec; ☐) In Guillaumes, at the northern mouth of the Gorges de Dalius, is this big, pink, green-shuttered chalet where you can watch the weekly village sheep fair take place at the sheepfolds opposite from your simple but cosy room. Breakfast costs

€5.50, but if you're dining at the restaurant anyway (which is well worth doing), then it's worth taking up the half-pension option for €17 per person, which includes breakfast for free.

Le Valbergan (☎ 04 93 02 50 28; 2 av Valberg, Valberg; menus from €22; ☹ closed Sun dinner & Mon; ☐) The mountain cuisine here is guaranteed to warm your cockles. Specialities include *raclettes* (melted cheese over boiled potatoes, served with pickles and ham), cheese fondues, *fondues bourguignonnes* (beef cubes fried in oil) and fish or meat *pierrades* (meat grilled on a stone slab).

Getting There & Away

Three daily buses run between Nice and Isola 2000 (2½ hours) from December to April, with one or two a day the rest of the year. Call ☎ 04 93 85 92 60 for information. During the ski season, buses serve Nice-Côte d'Azur airport (two hours).

Société Broch (☎ 04 93 31 10 52) operates one daily bus year-round between Nice, Nice-Côte d'Azur airport and Valberg (two hours).

VALLÉE DE LA VÉSUBIE

Signs of civilisation appear in the Vésubie, a dead-end valley accessed from the south, often referred to as 'Nice's Switzerland' due to its proximity to the Côte d'Azur.

The **Gorges de la Vésubie** winds from the valley's south. For a stunning aerial view of the gorge and its surroundings, head for **La Madone d'Utelle** (1181m), a pilgrimage site settled by Spanish sailors in the 9th century and crowned with a chapel (1806). From the mountain village of **St-Jean la Rivière** (on the D2565), a stone bridge crosses the River Var, from where a steep, winding mountain pass (the D32) leads west to **Utelle** (population 489), 6km northeast of La Madone.

About 18km north of St-Jean along the D2565, just past the turning for **La Bollène-Vésubie** (elevation 964m), you arrive at a crossroads. Snake east along the D171 to **Belvédère** (population 495, elevation 820m), a hilltop village where you can learn how milk is made in the **Musée du Lait** (Milk Museum); visits are arranged by the **tourist office** (☎ 04 93 03 51 66; mairie.belvedere@smtm06.fr; 1 place Colonel Baldoni).

VIA FERRATA

During WWI Italian troops moved swiftly and safely through the Dolomites – the natural frontier between Italy and Austria – using iron-rung ladders and steel cables bolted into the rocky mountainside. Today, similar routes known as *via ferrata* (meaning 'iron way' in Italian) allow adventurous tourists to scale Alpine rock faces without knowing the first thing about rock-climbing.

Haute-Provence sports a clutch of *via ferrata* courses, rigged at dizzying heights and guaranteed to get the blood pumping. Anyone (with guts and a good level of fitness) can do it: harnessed climbers are attached to the rock by two lines. To move along the rock-face safely, climbers unclip one karabiner and attach it further along the steel cable, before doing the same with the second.

Courses range in length from 3½ hours to 5½ hours; first-timers can tackle short sections. Giddy elevations of up to 2274m are reached and *ponts Himalayen* (rope bridges with steel cables at waist height), *ponts de singe* (monkey bridges with steel cables above your head) and *tyroliennes* (zip lines, requiring climbers to pull themselves along, legs dangling) are hair-raising features of most.

Climbers need a *casque* (helmet), *mousquetons* (a harness attached to two cables with shock-absorbers and karabiners) and sturdy walking boots with good grip. Gloves also come in handy. Everything but boots and gloves can be hired on-site from €14. Course admission starts from an additional €3 or from €24 for a *carnet* of 10 tickets. Equipment hire and tickets are generally handled by the local tourist office.

There are four *via ferrata* in the northeast of the region: **Baus de la Frema** (☎ 04 93 02 89 54; near La Colmiane, Vallée de la Vésubie); **Les Demoiselles du Castagnet** (☎ 04 93 05 05 05; Puget-Théniers); **La Traditionelle** (☎ 04 93 23 02 66; Auron, Vallée de la Tinée); and the **Circuit des Comtes Lascaris**, which is split across three sites – in La Brigue and Tende in the Vallée de la Roya, and in Peille. Contact the tourist information centres in those towns for details, including local mountain guides if you'd rather not scale new heights alone. The Peille section is not recommended for beginners.

Online, www.viaferrata.org has information as well as a forum for climbers.

The valley's main outdoor-activity base is **St-Martin-Vésubie** (population 1089, elevation 1000m), 13km north of Belvédère. For a panorama of the village, follow the steep D31 up to **Venanson** (elevation 1164m), a hamlet perched on a rock above St-Martin.

Activities

CYCLING

Colmiane Sports and Ferrata Sport (see below) both hire mountain bikes (€6/20 per hour/day) to take on the 215km of trails through the valley.

PARAGLIDING

High-flyers can paraglide in St-Dalmas-Valdeblère (elevation 1350m), 5km west of La Colmiane. The **tourist office** (☎ 04 93 23 25 90; www.colmiane.com in French; ☎ call for seasonal hr) in La Roche, a hamlet 4km west of St-Dalmas-Valdeblère, has a list of paragliding schools.

SKIING

The small ski station of **La Colmiane**, 7km west of St-Martin-Vésubie across Col de St-Martin, has one chairlift. It whisks skiers and walkers up to **Pic de la Colmiane** (1795m), where 30km of ski slopes and several walking and mountain-bike trails can be accessed. A single ascent/descent/10-ride card costs €2.50/2/20. The chairlift runs from 10am to 6pm daily.

Escapade Bureau des Guides (below) offers **heliskiing** (from €210 for two drops).

VIA FERRATA

The **Via Ferrata du Baus de la Frema** (☎ 04 93 02 89 54) is 3km from La Colmiane ski station along an unpaved track. **Colmiane Sports** (☎ 04 93 02 87 00; ferratasport@infonie.fr) and **Ferrata Sport** (☎ 04 93 02 80 56; a.sorridente@wanadoo.fr) both rent *via ferrata* gear.

Escapade Bureau des Guides (below) in St-Martin-Vésubie can help you around the *via ferrata* for €40/55 per half-/full day. It also organises guided climbs (€35) and canyoning (€30 to €60). In La Colmiane, the **Bureau des Guides** (☎ /fax 04 93 02 88 30) charges similar rates.

For more information about *via ferrata*, see p253.

WALKING

In St-Martin-Vésubie, **Escapade Bureau des Guides** (☎ 04 93 03 31 32; www.guidescapade.com; place du Marché; ☎ 10.30am-12.30pm & 4.30-7.30pm Jul & Aug) leads three walks per week into the Vallée des

Merveilles (€30; see below). The **tourist office** (☎ 04 93 03 21 28; www.saintmartinvesubie.fr in French; place Félix Faure; ☎ 9am-7pm Jul & Aug, 9am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Sat, 2-6pm Sun Sep-Jun) has a list of mountain guides who lead walks and ski tours. Walks are graded from easy to difficult.

A good map for walks in the area is Didier-Richard's No 9 or IGN's Série Bleue map No 3741OT *Vallée de la Vésubie, Parc National du Mercantour*, available at bookshops and national park offices.

Sleeping & Eating

Les Marmottes (☎ 04 93 02 89 04; www.lesmarmottes.com in French; St-Dalmas-Valdeblère; dm/d/tr €14/42/52.50; ☎ ☎) Whether you're a hiker, a couple or a family, this *gîte-chambre d'hôte* in the pretty little stone village of Dalmas makes an ideal base for setting out for mountain walks on your own or in the company of host and mountain guide Bernard. Atmospheric tables d'hôtes (€16) and breakfast (€4) can also be included in half-pension options.

Le Boréon (☎ 04 93 03 20 35; www.hotelboreon.com in French; Le Boréon; d €45-56, menu €18-29; ☎ ☎) Magical mountain views unfold from the timber terrace of this quintessential Snow White chalet 8km north of St-Martin-Vésubie and just an hour due north of Nice. Cosy up in its dozen rooms and watch the snowflakes fall outside while dining on alpine specialities including homemade pasta, terrines and a steaming fondue served by the fire in the beamed dining room.

La Trappa (☎ 04 93 03 21 50; place du Marché, St-Martin-Vésubie; menus from €18; ☎ closed Mon) At this family-run village restaurant you can eat snails in garlic butter, game terrine, herb-infused lamb and other 'mountain' food. It sits in a peaceful square, with the sound of trickling water in the background.

Getting There & Away

Contact **Transport Régional des Alpes-Maritimes** (☎ 04 93 85 92 60) for seasonal schedules between Nice and La Colmiane (two hours) and a weekend service from La Colmiane via St-Martin-Vésubie (1¾ hours).

VALLÉE DES MERVEILLES

The 'Valley of Wonders' contains one of the world's most stupendous collections of Bronze Age petroglyphs dating between 1800 and 1500 BC, which are thought to originate from a Ligurian cult. Effectively an open-air

art gallery, wedged between the Vésubie and Roya Valleys, it shelters more than 36,000 rock engravings of human figures, bulls and other animals spread over 30 sq km around Mont Bégo (2870m).

The main access routes into the valley are the eastbound D91 from St-Dalmas de Tende in the Vallée de la Roya, or the dead-end D171, which leads north to the valley from **Roquebillière** (population 1513) in the Vallée de la Vésubie. Snow-covered much of the year, the best time to visit is July to September. Access is restricted to protect the precious artworks: walkers should only visit with an official guide (see opposite and right).

IGN's Série Bleue map No 3841OT *Vallée de la Roya, Vallée des Merveilles* (€9.50) covers the area in a scale of 1:25,000.

VALLÉE DE LA ROYA

The Roya Valley once served as a hunting ground for King Victor Emmanuel II of Italy, and only became part of France in 1947. The pretty township of **Breil-sur-Roya** (population 2023) sits just 62km northeast of Nice. Panoramic views unfold from the Col de Brouis (879m), which links **Sospel** (population 2937), 21km south, with the Roya Valley.

Gashed into the landscape, the dramatic **Gorges de Saorge**, 9km north of Breil-sur-Roya, lead to fortified **Saorge** (population 398, elevation 520m). The vertiginous village is a maze of tangled streets and 15th- to 17th-century houses.

Immediately north, the **Gorges de Bergue** lead to **St-Dalmas de Tende**, which is the main gateway into the Vallée des Merveilles. From St-Dalmas de Tende, the D91 winds 10km west along the Vallon de la Minière to **Lac des Mesches** (1390m), from where trails lead into the valley past the Refuge des Merveilles (2111m). Alternatively, continue 5km to the mountain resort of **Casterino** to pick up more northern trails.

Equally scenic is the eastbound D143 from St-Dalmas de Tende to **La Brigue** (elevation 770m) and 4km further on to **Notre Dame des Fontaines**, dubbed the Sistine Chapel of the southern Alps, with beautifully preserved frescoes by 15th-century Piedmontese painters Jean Canavesio and Jean Baleison. Contact the tourist office in La Brigue for information.

In **Tende** (population 1890, elevation 830m), 4km north of St-Dalmas de Tende, the **Musée des Merveilles** (☎ 04 93 04 32 50; www.museedesmerveilles.com; av du 16 Septembre 1947; adult/14-16yr

€4.55/2.30; ☎ 10am-6.30pm May-mid-Oct, 10am-5pm mid-Oct-Apr, closed mid-late Mar & mid-late Dec) explains the natural history of the valley and exhibits numerous archaeological finds.

Also in Tende, the small but sweet **Maison du Miel et de l'Abeille** (House of Honey & Bees; ☎ 04 93 04 76 22; place Lieutenant Kalck; ☎ Jun-Sep) shows how the region's honey is made. Wonderful cheeses, hams and freshly baked breads are sold at several artisan shops on rue de France and av du 16 Septembre 1947.

In July the valley celebrates **Les Baroquiales**, a baroque art and music festival with period markets, 17th-century restaurant *menus*, street entertainment and a series of concerts.

Just 5km north of Tende, the **Tunnel de Tende** – engineered in 1882 – provides a vital link into Italy.

Information

The Vallée de la Roya has several small tourist offices:

Breil-sur-Roya (☎ 04 93 04 99 76; www.breil-sur-roya.fr in French; place Bianchéri; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2.30-5.30pm Mon-Sat, 9am-1pm Sun May-Sep, 8.30am-12.30pm & 1.30-5.30pm Mon-Fri, 8.30am-12.30pm Sat Oct-Apr)

La Brigue (☎ 04 93 04 60 04; www.labrugue.fr in French; av du Général de Gaulle; ☎ 10am-noon & 2-5pm Wed-Mon)

Sospel (☎ 04 93 04 15 80; www.sospel-tourisme.com in French; 19 av Jean Médecin; ☎ 2.30-6.30pm Mon, 9.30am-12.30pm & 2.30-6.30pm Tue-Sat, 9.30am-12.30pm Sun)

Tende (☎ 04 93 04 73 71; www.tendemerveilles.com in French; av du 16 Septembre 1947; ☎ Tue-Sat)

Activities

VIA FERRATA

The **Maison de la Montagne et des Sports** (see p256) rents equipment for Tende's dizzying **Via Ferrata des Comtes Lascaris** (for details see p253) and can provide you with a guide (€46). Alternatively, contact the **Bureau des Guides** (☎ 04 93 04 77 85; www.berengeraventures.com in French; Cagnorina) in Tende.

WALKING & CYCLING

Tende's tourist office has information on guided archaeological walks to Mont Bégo (adult/12 to 18 years €10/5) on weekends in June (and May if there's no snow), daily in July and August, and Monday to Friday in September.

In July and August the **Parc National du Mercantour office** (☎ 10am-1pm & 2.15-7pm Fri-Wed mid-Jun-mid-Sep), inside Sospel's old city gate, organises guided walks and distributes a map

detailing 19 mountain-biking itineraries. Cycling club **Sospel VTT** (☎ 06 70 76 57 05; www.sospel.vtt.net in French; Sospel) rents wheels. In Tende the **Maison de la Montagne et des Sports** (☎/fax 04 93 04 77 73; mmstende@aol.com; 11 av du 16 Septembre 1947) hires bikes and can give you the inside track on 23 bike trails leading from Tende, Col de Tende, La Brigue and Casterino.

WHITE-WATER SPORTS

Breil-sur-Roya is the premier water-sports base. **Roya Évasion** (☎ 04 93 04 91 46; www.royaevasion.com in French; 1 rue Pasteur) organises kayaking, canyoning and rafting trips on the River Roya, as well as walks and mountain-bike expeditions. **AET Nature** (☎ 04 93 04 47 64; www.aetcanyoning.com; 392 chemin du Foussa), with a bureau on central place Bianchéri, organises similar trips. A day's canyoning costs between €44 and €60 depending on the level of difficulty, and there are also two-day 'extreme' journeys (€150).

Sleeping & Eating

Le Miramonti (☎ 04 93 04 61 82; fax 04 93 04 78 71; 5-7 rue Vassalo, Tende; d from €35, menus from €15, ☎ restaurant lunch Tue-Sun, dinner Tue-Sat, hotel & restaurant closed Nov)

Rooms at this popular spot in Tende have high ceilings and are awash with natural light. The restaurant, serving Piedmontese specialities, absolutely throngs with people – so book ahead. The Miramonti also organises jeep tours into the Vallée des Merveilles.

Castel du Roy (☎ 04 93 04 43 66; www.castelduroy.com; rte de Tende; d €60-85, tr €90-100, q €100-110, menu €25; ☎ restaurant dinner daily, hotel & restaurant early Apr–mid-Oct; ☎ ☎ ☎) Signposted off the Tende-bound N204 from Breil-sur-Roya, this place is famous for its delicious traditional restaurant and cheerful floral guest rooms (some wheelchair accessible) with floor-to-ceiling arched doors and views over five acres of grounds where you can play badminton and fish for trout.

Getting There & Away

Trains run several times per day along the Nice–Turin line through the valley. From Nice, destinations you can travel to include Sospel (€5.90, 45 minutes), Breil-sur-Roya (€7.30, one hour), St-Dalmas de Tende (€9.80, 1½ hours via Breil-sur-Roya) and Tende (€10.80, 1½ hours).

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