



Photographs: David Salors/Corbis; Mary Dowey; Bon Appetit/Alamy; Maps: Maggie Nelson



Left: perched on a hilltop, Gordes is one of many villages offering an ideal base to visit the Luberon and sample delicacies made from local truffles (top) as well as Banon goat's cheese wrapped in chestnut leaves (above)



### Six of the best wineries to visit

- ★ **Domaine de la Citadelle, Ménerbes**  
Luberon's flagship estate, launched in 1989 by film producer Yves Rousset-Rouard and now run by his son Alexis. Polished wines, a shop and a corkscrew museum. [www.domaine-citadelle.com](http://www.domaine-citadelle.com)
- ★ **Château Turcan, Ansouis**  
In the same family since 1860, Turcan offers a range of well-made wines alongside a museum brimming with wine-related curiosities. [www.chateau-turcan.com](http://www.chateau-turcan.com)
- ★ **Domaine Guillaume Gros, Maubec**  
One of the Luberon's most exciting new names. Silky, hedonistic reds made in tiny quantities are his forte. No visitor facilities; appointments essential. [www.domaineguillaumegros.com](http://www.domaineguillaumegros.com)
- ★ **Château la Canorgue, Bonnieux**  
Famous as the setting for Ridley Scott's film *A Good Year*, though that shouldn't eclipse the wines made by Jean-Pierre Margan and daughter Nathalie – organic and pure. +33 (0)4 90 75 81 01
- ★ **Bastide du Claux, La Motte D'Aigues**  
Sylvain Morey fashions exquisitely poised wines with a Burgundian focus on minerality and freshness. Appointments recommended. [www.bastideduclaux.fr](http://www.bastideduclaux.fr)
- ★ **Château Val Joanis, Pertuis**  
This huge property may not make the Luberon's best wines, but is a lovely place to visit. The 18th-century-style garden is one of the most beautiful in the south of France while the shop sells fine local products. [www.val-joanis.com](http://www.val-joanis.com)



**FACT FILE**  
**Planted area**  
6,000 hectares  
**Main grapes**  
**White** Grenache Blanc, Clairette, Vermentino, Bourboulenc, Roussanne, Marsanne, Viognier  
**Rosé** Grenache Noir, Syrah, Cinsault  
**Red** Syrah, Grenache Noir, Mourvèdre, Carignan  
**Soil types** Varies, but includes sand, limestone scree, red clay

## The *Decanter* travel guide to Luberon, France

With its pretty hilltop towns to please walkers, and superb food and wine for gourmands, 'Peter Mayle country' is still as enticing as ever, says Mary Dowey

HAS ANYBODY NOT heard of the Luberon? Some 25 years ago the world would have put its hand up in answer. The pretty countryside tucked under the hem of the Southern Rhône was a sleepy backwater – east of Avignon, north of Aix-en-Provence but as vague in its impact as the mountain of the Grand Luberon blanketed in autumn mist. That changed in 1989 when *A Year in Provence* became an immediate bestseller. For readers

everywhere from Vauxhall to Vancouver, Peter Mayle's account of life around Ménerbes gave the Luberon a clear, compelling identity. Here was a place where you could feast your eyes on ravishing landscapes, gorge on truffles, drink decent local wines and move through life at the same slow pace as the ancient Citroëns on the roads. The book transfigured the whole image of Provence, making the hotspots of the Côte d'Azur seem infinitely less appealing than the languid Luberon. Or so it seemed to the English-speaking world. In fact, the Luberon's emergence as a tourist destination had begun in the late 1960s. Wealthy Parisians came south in summer to restore quaint, pitifully deserted villages such as Oppède-le-Vieux, while well-to-do Marseille families migrated north, swapping the bustle and heat of the coast for rural calm and a less sweltering climate.

*'The Luberon has managed to retain the rural charm which made it so appealing in the first place'*

From a wine point of view, those cool summer nights are vital. The long ridge of the Montagne du Luberon, rising to more than 1,000m, cools the region, slowing down grape-ripening. So the warm southern Rhône's southernmost appellation is more capable than many further north of making crisp whites, delicate rosés and elegant reds in which cool-toned Syrah tempers heat-loving Grenache. For all seasons Visitors still see the Luberon as a summer destination. Even in the August heat it is greener than other parts of the south, its melon fields and orchards watered by the Durance river through an ingenious Roman channelling system. Heaped with impeccable produce all year round, the markets in summer seem especially enticing, with cherries, peaches, apricots and Cavaillon's famous melons

on offer alongside delectable goat's cheeses – the local star among them, Banon, hogging attention with its distinctive chestnut-leaf wrapping. Summer is the time to enjoy this bounty in the Luberon's most idyllic setting – on a terrace of sun-warmed stones shaded by a canopy of vines. Because the region's raw ingredients are so good, talented chefs like Edouard Loubet, Reine Sammut and Eric Sapet count among its most passionate supporters, spinning magic out of everything from poppies and thyme honey to 40 kinds of basil. But other seasons can be just as entrancing, not least because the sky is almost always blue. Spring brings blossom and tender asparagus; autumn, wild mushrooms and the scent of woodsmoke; ➤

**How to get there**  
**By plane** to Marseille or Avignon (flight time less than two hours from various UK airports); then a 30-minute drive to the vineyards  
**By fast train (TGV)** to Avignon from London St Pancras (about six hours), plus a 20-minute drive  
**More information** visit [www.provenceguide.co.uk](http://www.provenceguide.co.uk) and [www.vins-luberon.fr](http://www.vins-luberon.fr)





*‘The Luberon can show two faces: the one with vineyards, olive groves, lavender fields and red cliffs smiles warmly’*

winter, diamond-bright light, truffles and the olive harvest, followed by the grassy taste of the new oil. To compound these seasonal variations, it is often said that the Luberon can show two faces at any time of year. The one with vineyards, olive groves, orchards, lavender fields and red cliffs smiles warmly. The other, with its stark grey mountains, forests, gorges and bare limestone dwellings known as *bories*, appears more austere, especially under the icy blast of the mistral wind. Even the picturesque, precariously perched villages – Gordes, Ménerbes, Bonnieux and the rest – look wary and guarded, as if they still fear the sort of attack which, in 1545, saw 11 Waldensian (Protestant) communities massacred in one night.

**Small growers, big investment**

But privacy is granted to outsiders. Celebrity visitors including Ridley Scott, John Malkovich, Tom Stoppard, Demi Moore, Sheila Hancock and Viscount Linley have generally been left in peace. Sophisticated enough to cater to their needs (with antiques shops and a few designer boutiques), the Luberon has managed to retain the rural charm which made it so appealing in the first place. It's a land of small farmers. Go to Coustellet farmers' market on a Sunday morning and, from the home-grown garlic on one stand and the home-cured olives on another, you'll see just how small.

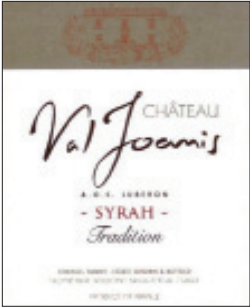
The wine scene reflects the same mix, with a high proportion of individual growers, their families



here for generations, and a low but significant number of glitzy investors from elsewhere. The Côtes du Luberon appellation, now known as Luberon, was created in 1988. Although it has taken longer to develop a momentum than has the region as a whole, there are 49 wineries today compared with 25 just 15 years ago. (Houses are expensive, but vineyard land remains relatively cheap).

Wine prices are a shade ambitious simply because thirsty visitors with cash to spare will pay them. On the other hand, quality is generally high and, thanks to those same visitors, a fair number of wineries are open to the public. With a major wine tourism initiative at the planning stage, some estates already offer picnics and vineyard walks.

For anybody who can face the occasional hill, walking is the ideal way to get around – especially as the entire Luberon appellation sits within the region's vast national park. Why not pick up a wine trail booklet at the tourist office and see how much you can manage on foot? And if you tire, a restorative restaurant is never far away – as Peter Mayle discovered all those years ago. **D**



**Above: wineries to visit in the Luberon AC include (from top) Domaine de la Citadelle, Château la Canorgue and Château Val Joanis**

**Left: Reine Sammut, chef at the Michelin-starred Auberge la Fenière in Lourmarin**

**Top left: monks at the Sénanque Abbey near the hilltop village of Gordes grow lavender for their livelihoods**

Mary Dowey is a wine, food and travel writer who has a home in the southern Rhône and writes on the region at [www.provencefoodandwine.com](http://www.provencefoodandwine.com)



**Above: summer is the perfect season to enjoy the region's famous Cavaillon melons**

**Below: Roussillon's famous red ochre cliffs**



# Luberon

WHERE TO STAY, SHOP, EAT AND RELAX  
Superb accommodation, fine dining, tasty souvenirs and history

**HOTELS & B&Bs**

**Bastide de Capelongue**

Just outside Bonnieux, this country house hotel and Michelin-starred restaurant is run by ambitious chef Edouard Loubet. Dishes are often divine – and never less than intriguing. [www.capelongue.com](http://www.capelongue.com)

**Château Grand Callamand**

Recent recruits to wine production near Pertuis, Nathalie and Albert Souzan have created three charming rooms for B&B guests in their handsomely restored 16th-century bastide. [www.chateaugrandcallamand.fr](http://www.chateaugrandcallamand.fr)

**Le Moulin des Sources**

A stylish yet well-priced B&B in a former olive oil mill conveniently close to Gordes. L'Occitane toiletries, pool towels, robes and delicious breakfasts add to the appeal. [www.le-moulin-des-sources.com](http://www.le-moulin-des-sources.com)

**BARS & RESTAURANTS**

**Auberge de Lagnes**

The perfect village restaurant – friendly, cosy and inexpensive – presenting simple, tasty food with a flourish. Not completely French, however: chef Stewart Luxton is a native of Ipswich. [www.aubergedelagnes.fr](http://www.aubergedelagnes.fr)

**Auberge la Fenière**

The Michelin-starred restaurant with rooms run by the Luberon's culinary first lady, Reine Sammut, and her sommelier husband Guy. Brilliantly vibrant, unfussy food with an inspiring wine list. [www.reinesammut.com](http://www.reinesammut.com)

**Le Thé dans l'Encrier**

This nifty little bookshop café is a great spot to stop off for coffee, tea or a light lunch in the centre of Lourmarin. Quiches, crumbles and cakes are all home-cooked by owner Mapie Lamy. **+33 (0)4 90 68 88 41**

**Restaurant du Lac**

Philippe Sublet gives Provençal food a gentle modern twist in his lakeside restaurant. Fish fresh off the boats in Marseille are a special draw. Three calm bedrooms and a super breakfast also beckon. [www.restaurantdulac.eu](http://www.restaurantdulac.eu)

**SHOPS**

**Maison de la Truffe et du Vin**

Wine and truffles, the Luberon's two key products, are celebrated in a grand 17th-century mansion atop Ménerbes. Restaurant, shop and cellar, with a superb selection of local wines at cellar-door prices. [www.vin-truffe-luberon.com](http://www.vin-truffe-luberon.com)

**La Roumanière**

This sheltered workshop for the mentally handicapped in Robion is worth supporting. Using luscious Luberon fruits, it produces more than 60 splendid jams, prettily topped with Provençal fabrics. [www.laroumaniere.com](http://www.laroumaniere.com)

**L'Art Glacier**

Strange but true: a sensational artisan ice cream producer operates in the wilds of the country near Ansouis. Sample at least a few of Olivier Perrière's 50-plus flavours on a terrace with a view. [www.artglacier.com](http://www.artglacier.com)

**TOURIST TRAIL**

**Abbaye de Sénanque**

Deep in a valley beyond Gordes, this 12th-century Cistercian abbey surrounded by lavender fields rewards visitors with a calm, mystical beauty in a way that endless postcard photos simply can't. [www.senanque.fr](http://www.senanque.fr)

**Château d'Ansouis**

There's no better place to absorb a swathe of French history in an hour. Behind its classical façade, this magnificently preserved château is medieval on one side (don't miss the kitchen) and 18th-century on the other. Mesmerising. [www.chateauansouis.fr](http://www.chateauansouis.fr)

**The Mines de Bruoux and Roussillon cliffs at sunset**

Explore the cathedral-like chambers of the Bruoux quarries to learn the secrets of the ochre trade; then snap your most vivid photos as the evening sun burnishes the scarlet cliffs of Roussillon. [www.minesdebruoux.fr](http://www.minesdebruoux.fr)