

### France: Haute Provence – Small Mountains & Big Gorges

Tour code: JPR

Revised: October 08

Haute Provence is a beautiful area of mountains and craggy limestone dissected by deep gorges. The area's wondrous scenery, be it natural, agricultural or architectural, has appeared in numerous films like 'Manon des Sources', and of course the Stella Artois adverts!

Much of our walking route follows the GR4 (Grande Randonnee) long distance trail fairly closely, which crosses France from the Cote d'Azur to the Atlantic. Our first day's walk from St. Andre Les Alpes (not on the GR4) traverses the hills high above the Lac de Castillon. Our second night is spent in Castellane, a remote town with echoes of Napoleon's march on Paris, as well as battles between maquisards and retreating German occupiers in 1944. From here we follow an old Roman route, which now links remote and picturesque hamlets high up on the north side of the Verdon valley, to reach the ancient village Rougon, suspended above the river Verdon. This is across from the limestone Jaws that mark the entrance to the famous Verdon Gorge. It is only a short, but steep drop down from here to Point Sublime and its great viewpoint into the abyss of the gorge!

The following day is spent exploring and following the best part of the magnificent Grand Canyon (or Gorges) du Verdon - France's most 'gorgeous' scenery, with 1500-foot high limestone cliffs, towering above the river. This is a fascinating but strenuous day: There is a tunneled section and some safe ladders to negotiate, as you wander from meander to meander and cliff to cliff: It is rocky underfoot. At each twist and turn a new aspect of the gorge will open itself to you - vistas of water, rock, forest and sky. There is a final steep climb up to a point called La Maline and its excellent general view down into and across the latter part of the gorge, where instead of looking like jaws, the gorge looks more like a fissure in a high plateau. You can then either take a taxi or walk the final road section into La Palud, a picturesque village that boasts a fine Romanesque style church.

The fifth day takes you up through the pine, oak and beech forest to about 1380 metres to a magnificent airy picnic spot overlooking Lac de Ste.Croix. Then you descend along a magnificent forested rocky ridge to the historic pottery town of Moustiers Ste. Marie. Here the hotel, indeed the whole town, is built straddling a ravine with waterfalls. Beyond Moustiers, the scenery abruptly changes; you are suddenly out of the Alps. Across the Plateau de Valensole, you walk through fields of lavender, cereals, apple orchards, vineyards and truffle forests. Our next night is spent in a rustic hunting chateau near the historic town of Riez, where you can admire the group of fine Roman Columns You are now in Provence proper, the Roman Provincia.

From Riez, you will be collected by taxi and taken to the railway station at the mediaeval town of Manosque, from where it is a short train ride to Aix en Provence (which is conveniently located on the way to Marseilles). This old Roman city, originally established because of its thermal baths, has many old features including the house of Cezanne the famous Provencal Painter, the open air flower market, many old churches, some fountains famous for their sculptures and the baths themselves. With an after breakfast departure to Aix, you will have the best part of a day to look around, before your last night of the tour there. What better way to end than sipping a glass of the finest 'Bandol' sitting on the Cours Mirabeau! An Extra night in Aix is also recommended!

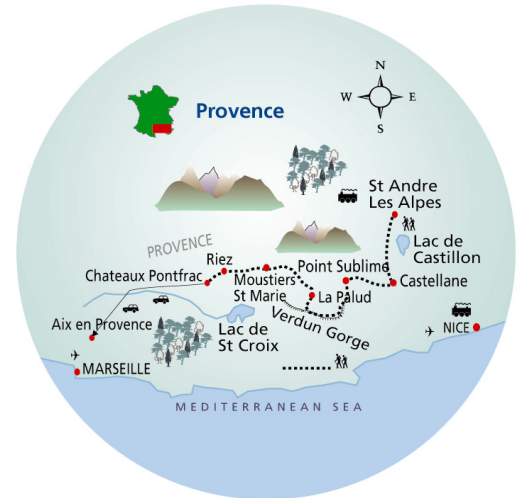
#### Travel Information

**Season:** May to mid October. Please note that it is very hot in this area in July and August and those months are better avoided. This is an ideal trip for spring or autumn: times of early flowers or golden hues rather than the Lavender blues! Both spring and autumn can bring rain spells and high summer can also produce electrical storms.

**Arrival:** Between 5p.m and 7p.m on Day 1

**First hotel:** At St Andre Les Alpes

**Travel:** We offer a return flight to Nice from London Heathrow with BA however a more ideal arrangement would be an "open jaw" ticket into Nice (from London Heathrow) and return from Marseille (to London Gatwick)



if you are using public transport to and from airports. There may be a small supplement. Please enquire.

**By air to Nice:** British Airways Scheduled flights available from Heathrow to Nice. Then airport bus no 23 to Chemins de Fer de Provence railway station (40mins) and by train from Nice to St. Andre-les-Alpes, which takes about 2.5 hours (14 Euros approx. not included). The last train leaves Nice at 17.00 hours.

**End of Tour:** Aix en Provence after breakfast on day 8.. You travel by bus or train back to Nice (3-4 hours). (Bus / train tickets are not included). Then British Airways flight from Nice to London Heathrow.

Or Bus/train to Marseille, which takes around 40 mins If British Airways flight Marseille to Gatwick for return flight home.

Marseille-Provence airport at Marignane is linked by an airport bus service with Marseille train station (every 20 minutes) and with Aix bus station (about once per hour). The journey time in each case is around 30 minutes and the fare approx. 10 Euros per person one way. The bus station in Aix is about 15 minutes walk/short taxi ride from the train station, and in Marseille just outside the train station. There is plenty of room for baggage on the airport bus services.

## Level of Difficulty

**Fitness:** This is a very subjective matter on this tour. Sherpa walking grades presume a certain standard common to similar tours and an individual's perception of their own fitness in relation to a grading will vary.

The walking on this tour is variously: moderate and quite challenging. A reasonable level of fitness, a reasonable head for heights and an ability to cope on rocky paths is required for the gorge day and the day to Moustiers. You need good boots throughout the tour: The trails are generally good, but on occasion there are steep or winding sections of loose limestone shingle. Carry plenty of drinking water and adequate protection against the sun, including a sun hat. There are steep ascents/descents sometimes in hot weather. You will need to take care walking on this tour.

**Day stages:** In the region of 14km to 23km per day with average altitude gains of 550m. 5 to 8 hours walking per day for most people. Slow walkers will take longer.

**Waymarks:** The trail follows in the main well-established paths, much of the way being waymarked with the distinctive white/red/white GR (Grande Randonnee) waymarks and presents no special difficulties. Other sections have yellow or red paint marks and perhaps wooden signs. There are sections with steep steel ladders during the traverse of the Gorges du Verdon, but they have posed no problems to any of the hundreds of our customers who have done this trek either escorted or self-guided. A compass and the skill to use it can be desirable at one or two points, notably on Days 3 & 5.

## General Information

**Note:**

**Baths:** it is not normal for your room to have a bath, the main reason being that it takes up a lot of space, some hotels/guesthouses may have a separate room in the house where a bath is available to guests, but in the main it is showers.

**Breakfast:** in countries such as France usually consists of coffee and toast/croissant, if you want more for breakfast then we would suggest you purchase some food the night before. It is important for you to tell us if you have any dietary requirements when you book your holiday so that we can inform everyone that you are staying with.

**Single Supplements:** are payable on most of our tours. **1)** The single supplement guarantees the privacy of your own room, however, rooms can at times be small and in some places may not enjoy the same facilities as double/twin rooms. **2)** You are not just paying a supplement on the room but the luggage transfer costs you are paying in full. The cost of moving 1 bag or 2 bags etc remains the same. On some of our trips it is possible to reduce the cost of the single supplement if you happen to be a 3<sup>rd</sup> person travelling, or have chosen a date when other clients are booked.

Please note that in the case of late bookings or hotel closure we may use various other hotels, which offer a similar standard of accommodation and cuisine.

**Language:** Note that you will not necessarily come across people speaking English. Remember you have left home to find things different bring a phrase book, try to learn a bit of French!

**Luggage:** When staying in hotels, sometimes your luggage will have been taken to your room awaiting your arrival. However don't be surprised if your luggage is waiting for you to take it up to your room please politely ask someone if you need assistance

## Accommodation & Meals

Accommodation is on a half board basis on most nights in country inns (1\*, 2\* or 3\* Logis de France approved or similar standard) and 1 converted chateau. Bed and breakfast and 5 evening meals are included; on 2 nights you dine out at your own expense. Picnic lunches are not included in the tour cost but are available from hotels or can easily be obtained from local shops. We indicate in the route notes where there are suitable restaurants or cafes for lunch stops, or recommend you carry food if there are none convenient to the trail.

□ **Night 1: St Andre-les-Alpes.** A delightful Alpine village on the famous 'Ligne des Pignes' narrow gauge railway that links Digne and Nice. A centre for parascending. Our usual hotel is marvelously situated at the edge of Saint Andre les Alpes, in the heart of a wide valley with a beautiful view towards Lac de Castillon and the surrounding mountains. Classified 2\* star in the Logis de France guide, this hotel offers rooms with ensuite facilities, as well as a good restaurant for your evening meal (Dinner included).

□ **Night 2: Castellane.** Our 2\* hotel overlooks the main square of the historic mountain town, right on the 'Route Napoleon', all rooms have en suite facilities, T.V. Telephone. There is a fine Provençal large windowed restaurant serving fine evening meals. (Bed and Breakfast only)

□ **Night 3: Point Sublime.** This is the only hotel in the area, a rather neo Victorian establishment, situated on its terrace above the Verdon and across from the vertical cleft in the limestone plateau that marks the entrance to the gorge. Good rustic food is the norm, there is a nice terrace bar and there is a pleasing old-fashioned air about the place. During the high season it may be necessary to spend the night in La Palud as tomorrow and to do the gorge

walk with a taxi transfer back to point Sublime which will be included if this is the case (Dinner is included). Please note that the hotel's restaurant is closed on Wednesday evenings. If you happen to be at the hotel on a Wednesday, we will organize for a "cold plate" meal to be left for you in the lounge.

□ **Night 4: La Palud.** Our preferred, welcoming, modern hotel inside the ancient centre of the village well deserves its 2 star classification in the Logis de France guide. Its 20 spacious rooms have full ensuite facilities, TV etc. The cuisine is usually of a high standard – their buffet, when available, is particularly good. Breakfast is a buffet style as well and may include yoghurt with honey, a variety of fresh fruit, freshly baked bread and croissants. (Dinner included).

□ **Night 5: Moustiers-Ste-Marie.** Our comfortable and sensitively modernised small hotel is centrally situated in this popular village overlooking a series of waterfalls. It has a restaurant where you can take your time over dinner and from the light and airy breakfast room you may observe dippers flitting from boulder to boulder in the torrent below. (Dinner is included).

□ **Night 6: Near Riez.** We stay at a converted chateau in an idyllic rural setting 4km from the town of Riez. This is a real country house with very obvious connections with hunting and horses. The place has a rustic rural elegance. There is a small pool which is generally open throughout our season. Rooms are generally spacious and some have garden views. (Dinner is included).

□ **Night 7:** We offer a modern town hotel near the center of **Aix en Provence**. It is situated a few blocks away from the coach /bus station for Nice or Marseilles. It is a useful springboard for visiting the rest of the mediaeval town. (Bed and breakfast only).

## Outline Itinerary

**Day 1:** Arrive Nice. Transfer from airport to Chemin de Fer de Provence narrow gauge railway station and thence by train along spectacular alpine valleys to St. Andre, a small village set between forested hills and the Lac de Castillon. If there is time it is recommended that if you are able to take an early train that you stop at the beautiful historic town of Entrevoux and then catch the later train to St. Andre. (Train not included in tour price)

**Day 2:** We follow narrow trails over the hills high above the western side of the Lac de Castillon. Along the way the intense yellow flowers (at least in Spring) and honeyed scent of wild Broom and Rosemary, contrast with the deep green shades and resinous air of the pine forest. You are finally greeted by the stunning out crop of Notre Dame de Roche above Castellane; and you should have plenty of time before dinner to climb up to the little chapel there and take in the sunset. 15km/6hrs

**Day 3:** The well waymarked GR4 long distance trail from Castellane follows an ancient Roman route high up on the side of the deep winding Verdon valley. Ancient villages, with their tightly clustered ochre-walled houses, seem to grow naturally out of the rugged landscape. There is a small artisan village enroute where you can purchase hand made brooches, pottery and lavender essence, before heading off over the high limestone moors (**compass** useful here) and pastures before dropping down to Rougon and thence to Point Sublime. 22km/7hrs

**Day 4:** Today we tackle the traverse of the famous Gorges du Verdon, France's Grand Canyon. High up on the towering red and grey limestone walls of the gorge you may even spot rock gymnasts pitting their skill against the force of gravity. The gorge is quite challenging for hikers too, as there are a number of metal ladders to negotiate along the way. The walking is not as daunting as it may sound and only a modest head for heights and an ability on rocky paths is required. Halfway along is a delightful spot to picnic and cool off by the river. At certain water levels this is a nice place for a dip although normally very cold! Then there is a steep, sweaty climb up to La Maline, where from the balcony of the gite there you can in season, enjoy an overview of the gorge over a cold drink, before debating whether or not to walk the last section on road to La Palud, or take a taxi. 12km/6hrs (Point Sublime to Maline); 20km/8hrs (Point Sublime to La Palud).

**Day 5:** Today we follow a high forested ridge overlooking the turquoise-blue Lac de Ste. Croix, before making a steep descent and gradual reascent to the little town of Moustiers Ste. Marie, clustered at the foot of towering crags and long famous for its ceramics. The walking is dramatic, wild and beautiful and on the descent, you wind through giant limestone crags and rock towers. 16km/6hrs

**Day 6:** We walk abruptly up over the scarp slope and out of the Provencal Alps and into a new landscape: the broad vistas and immense arching skies of the Plateau de Valensole. The plateau is cultivated for cereals, lavender (at its best in July) and truffles (hidden underground between rows of specially planted Downey Oaks). We descend to the tiny village of Roumoules, perhaps have your picnic in the square under the plane trees. Next there is a gentle climb along a woody ridge and then a short steepish descent down to the town of Riez, where the columns of a Roman temple remind us of its historic past. After a Pastis (definitely not included), head off along the riverside, and short road section to our quiet hotel, that is except for the geese! Our night is spent in a converted chateau in a quiet rural setting about 4km from Riez. It is a superb quiet location to unwind. In season on warm days, you may want to enjoy the swimming pool in which to cool off. 23km/6.5hrs.

**Day 7:** After breakfast you will be transported to Manosque (included) to take a morning train to Aix en Provence (50 mins). The train takes about 50 mins.

**Day 8:** Depart Aix when ready: Bus or train from Aix perhaps to Marseille and its airport or back to Nice. Marseille is only 40 minutes away. Nice about 3 hours. Some people have preferred to return to Nice by train to Digne and then the Ligne des Pignes to Nice.

## Escorted departures 2009

EJPR19 Sat 16 May – Sat 23 May

EJPR22 Sat 12 Sept – Sat 19 Sept

**Please note:** That the holiday price does not include the cost of public transport to the first Hotel in St. Andre on Day 1. The train from Manosque to Aix en Provence on Day 7 and transport from Aix to departure points on Day 8.