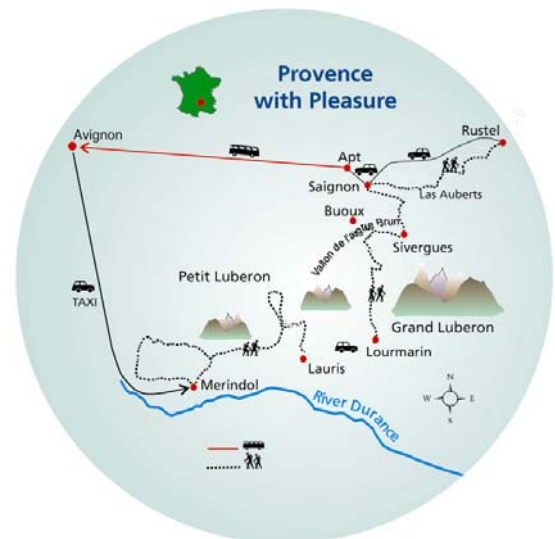


### France: Provence With Pleasure – in the Luberon

Tour code: JPP

Revised: Nov 2008

Between the Alps de Haute Provence and the Vaucluse plain, arises the bold outline of the Luberon Massif limestone escarpment; this is the symbol of the area, a mountain area that binds the region together. From the valleys of Calavon in the north, to the River Durance in the south, the peaks are the natural link for the "Pays du Luberon" – the lands that spread around them. This is the real Provence, full of character, with a wonderful climate, clean air and a rich and varied natural environment. This tour is an invitation to walk the little known hills and the gorges of the area, dotted with 'Mas' (stone Provencal farmhouses) and ochre coloured hilltop villages. Cross the tops of the Petite Luberon under deep blue skies; Span and scramble the narrow winding Regalon Gorge, visiting the remains of the Protestant homes from the Wars of Religion in Merindol. Admire the fountains and the narrow streets of Lourmarin, and discover the hillside beauty of Saignon, with its crumbling fortifications, old washing wells and tiny squares. Walk in the scent of the Mediterranean and the 'douceur de vivre' of the Luberon. You will note the subtle nuances of green in the extensive forests, the flamboyant pastel colours of the cliffs of ochre on a walk into the 'Colorado de Provence' and the dramatic creamy limestone cliffs below Buoux, where it is easy to lose yourself in the mediaeval remains of the castle suspended high above the valley.



This is the living Luberon, where everything goes back to man's relationship with the most basic element, the earth. The area is also characterized by dry stone walls and imposing "Bastides," villages perched on the sides of hills between church and château.

### Travel Information

**Season:** Any day from March 1 to June 10 and September 14 to November 1, 2008. Please note that it is very hot in this area in July and August and those months are avoided. This is an ideal trip for spring, early summer or autumn: times of early flowers or golden hues rather than the Lavender blues! Both spring and autumn can bring rain spells and electrical storms.

**Arrival:** Anytime during the day, rooms may not be available if you arrive early, but you will be able to leave your luggage and explore the town.

**First hotel:** In Avignon

**Travel:** Full package customers fly with Scheduled British Airways services from London Gatwick to Marseilles Airport. Land only customers could use the cheaper Easyjet services, Gatwick to Marseilles. The even cheaper RyanAir services to Nimes are also worth considering.

Transfers to and from Avignon TGV / SNCF are not included for both Full package and Land Only customers.

**If you are flying into Marseilles with B.A. or Easyjet:** This is relatively straightforward: From Marseilles Provence Airport you take a bus to the Aix TGV station from where (nearly every hour during the day) you take a TGV to Avignon TGV station.

Marseille: <http://www.marseille.aeroport.fr>

The travel time for the bus that goes from the Marseille airport to the Aix TGV station (closer than Marseille train station) is about 15 minutes and the one-way price is about 5 Euros. Buses leave every 30 minutes. After that the TGV from Aix to Avignon TGV is 20 minutes duration. Then From the Avignon TGV, take the blue shuttle bus into town. The shuttle bus fare is around 1.5 Euros.

If you are starting from **Marseilles Gare Saint-Charles** (i.e in town at the SNCF-French Railways) there are normally trains

every 1 to 2 hours to Avignon, taking around 30 mins on the TGV. Non TGV services are also possible but take around 1.5 hours.

### **If you are flying into Nimes with Ryan Air:**

Nimes: <http://www.nimes.cci.fr>

There is an Airport bus that goes from the Nimes airport to the Nimes SNCF station. The travel time is between 15 minutes to 30 minutes (depending on traffic).

The one-way price is 5 Euros. Buses leave after the plane's arrival, and doesn't hang around too long! The train from Nimes SNCF to Avignon Centre is 35-45 minutes and costs about 8 Euros.

**Travelling from Paris:** This is also quite straight forward! The TGV from Paris Gare de Lyon takes only 2hours 40 mins.

**End of Tour:** Saïgnon after breakfast on Day 8. There is an included transfer to the bus station in Apt and then a local bus to the Avignon center bus station (ticket included), taking about hour. (Private transfer can also be arranged Saïgnon to Avignon for about 80E). Then train to Marseille airport (not included). British Airways flight Marseille to Gatwick for return flight home for full package customers.

## **Level of Difficulty**

**Fitness:** This is a very subjective matter, 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: **Easy - Moderate.** **Although due to the length of walks and terrain we would classify the tour as more moderate.** Note that some trails are quite rough and stony. A reasonable level of fitness and ability on rocky paths is required especially for the gorge walking where there are a few short 'scrambling' descent sections, which are easily negotiated with a little care. The last walk, in the Colorado Provençal has some eroded sections that you also need to take care on. 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.

**Day stages:** 3 -7 hours of Medium walking.

**Waymarks:** The trail follows in the main, well-established paths, much of the way being waymarked with wooden signs and / or local waymarks or the white/red GR (Grande Randonnee) paint marks and presents no special difficulties. Straight forward map reading ability is necessary.

## **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, and preserves. Some walkers may find continental breakfasts 'insufficient', on this tour however, they do provide you with quite a bit of food! 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. 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.

**Language:** Note that you will not necessarily come across people speaking English. Remember you have left home to find things to be 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**

7 Continental Breakfasts and 6 Dinners are included. Dinners include entree, main course and dessert and are particularly wholesome, normally prepared by your host. 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.

Double occupancy with private facilities:

**Night 1:** In a \*\* hotel inside Avignon's fortified centre. This is an attractive small town hotel on a quiet boulevard, only 15 minutes walk from all the sites and Palace of The Popes (B&B).

**Nights 2 & 3:** In a guesthouse near Mérimindol. Relax by the pool with an aperitif before sharing a full Provençal dinner with the other guests here, just outside of the beautiful village. Rooms are all beautifully different, reflecting the owner's penchant for travel. The grounds are quiet as you at the edge of woodland.(Halfboard)

**Night 4:** In a guesthouse outside Lauris, a restored farmhouse lost in heart of the Luberon Regional Park. There are a couple of places used here, but both are rustic. Enjoy another locally prepared dinner. (Halfboard)

**Night 5:** In a hotel just outside the village of Buoux. You'll stay in a lovely residence nestled in the bottom of the Aiguebrun Valley with its pool and a locally (and even internationally) renowned restaurant. This prepares traditional Provençal cuisine. (Halfboard)

**Nights 6 & 7:** In a quiet guesthouse in the heart of Saïgnon. From the village enjoy views over the Luberon all the way to Mont Ventoux. The guesthouse, although modern, has a 2000 year old Roman well and a Mulberry tree from the same period within the grounds. Dinner is prepared here (Halfboard).

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.

## Outline Itinerary

**Day 1:** Arrive Marseilles. Transfer from airport to railway station in Avignon. Start your trip in the heart of Papal Avignon. From the "Palais des Papes" to the "Pont d'Avignon," a stroll through history. Dinner on your own. Hotel Avignon.

**Day 2: In Avignon; morning free, mid- afternoon transfer to Mérindol** by private taxi. The city was a strategic site in the Rhone valley, owing its origin to the 'Doms' rock, which made a great defensive site over looking the river. With the arrival of the popes in the 14th Century, the city became a second Rome. It was enriched by art in the 17th and 18th Centuries and it remained Papal property up to the French revolution. Stroll around the shopping streets in the pedestrian area (Joseph Vernet and St Agricol streets), the district of la Balance and along the wide Avenue de Republic. You will find Provençal materials, ceramics and pottery, terra cotta figurines (santons), handicrafts, and other specialities of the region. You may want to try one of the cruises on the River Rhone, there are cruises of various lengths which can be booked. Recommended is a 1-hour cruise around Avignon to see the Bridge, the Rocher des Doms, Fort St André and Philippe Le Bel tower, in order to look at the bridge and town from the waters edge. (Cruises may not operate early or late in the season).

Transfer to Mérindol by private taxi (included). From the top of the old village, contemplate the vast plain of the Durance River below, from where an abundance of melons and vegetables are farmed for the famous Cavaillon markets.

Mérindol is a village that symbolises the repression of the Protestant Waldensians. The village was destroyed in 1547 during the Wars of Religion. Fortunately the population were forewarned and most escaped into the mountains, returning later to reoccupy the site and to re-establish an attractive town. Hotel in Mérindol.

**Day 3: Mérindol - Gorge du Régalon - Mérindol (5 h, 14 km distance. 575 metres total ascent )** Discover the Régalon gorge, which plunges to a depth of 30 metres whilst the shortest distance between the gorge wall faces is less than 50 cm! The Gorges du Regalon are famous for their Mediterranean vegetation, that has survived thanks to a microclimate with an ideal degree of humidity. Types include: Stone Oaks, Maples, Aleppo Pines, Filarias, Winter Oaks, Alders and Wild Cherry trees. This place is very popular and can get busy at times, but if you are there out of high season / weekend and visit quite early, you maybe the only ones in the silent chasm with its dripping trees and morning fog. There are a few easy boulders to climb over during your walk through the gorges. The day will give you enough time for a picnic and to have a further look round Mérindol. Guesthouse in Mérindol.

**Day 4: Mérindol - Recaute (7h, 18km, 1000 metres total ascent)** We walk in the hills at the top of the Petit Luberon above the village of Lauris, perched in the Petit Luberon foothills, with amazing views across the Durance valley, the Alpilles range and the Luberon.

We arrive at a beautiful Cedar forest, where there is an opportunity for an additional loop. Originally from the Atlas Mountains of North Africa: The Atlas Cedar was sown on the petit Luberon around 1860 on only a few hectares and has since spread to more than 250 hectares on the plateau. The coolness of the forest explains the presence of mushroom species rare in Provence and many birds find refuge here too!

Continue the walk on to your guesthouse, lost in the Luberon National Park. Guesthouse in Recaute.

**Day 5: Recaute - Lourmarin - Buoux (4 h 15, 11km, total ascent 750 metres).**

Morning transfer by local taxi to Lourmarin, listed as "one of the most beautiful villages in France." The town nestles in the middle of vineyards, olive groves and almond trees. A very animated village in the summer due to its numerous cafe terraces, restaurants and boutiques, it attracts many visitors. There is a 15th and 16th Century, castle that has peculiar stairs and magnificent rooms to admire (only the Renaissance part of the castle is open to the public.) In the village you will notice the typical Mediterranean architecture in its winding narrow streets, lovely old restored houses and well shaded public squares where you can immerse yourself in the gentle Provençal ambience. The inhabitants will want to remind you that Albert Camus, winner of the Nobel Literature Prize, lived and wrote here. In fact he is buried in Lourmarin cemetery. (Morning market on Friday).

The walk starts from Lourmarin and heads towards Buoux Fort, which served as a refuge for the population during the Wars of Religion. The small village of Buoux ( which is just off our route, but can be walked to if required) is situated among the rolling hills in the heart of the Parc Naturel Régional du Luberon. Due to its geographical situation, the village has played a naturally defensive role since prehistoric times. At the top of the rocky spur, the Buoux fort served as a refuge. In 1660, King Louis the 14th ordered the fort's destruction and from this date, the village abandoned its defensive vocation. Today, Buoux is a peaceful rural village. Many of the houses in the area are from the middle and the end of the 17th century. These solid farmhouses, which belonged to wealthy Protestants, have been restored and maintained so well that they add unique style and character to the village. (Optional walk up to see the village) In the grounds of the Fort you can also discover pieces of the rampart and walls of the chapel, which are all that survive of the fortress today.

The steep surrounds of Buoux provide a paradise for climbing enthusiasts from around the World. The irregular contours of the Aigue-Brun River are filled with caves, cliffs and peaks. Hotel near Buoux (below the village).

**Day 6: Buoux - Sivergues - Saignon (4 h, 10 km distance, 450 metres total ascent )**

A shorter day to stop and enjoy the area! Following the Aiguebrun River through its gorges, you arrive at Sivergues, a hamlet whose 39 inhabitants mainly work in lavender and goat breeding. You'll feel as though you're in a village at the end of the world. You won't find café terraces or restaurants, but the peace and quiet will relax you as you enjoy strolling through the hamlet. You will come across some fine 16th and 17th century houses. Walk as far as the Fort de l'Archidiacre built in the 13th century (now a hiking gîte). It overlooks the whole of the Aiguebrun valley and you'll now understand why Sivergues was chosen by the Protestant Waldensians as a strategic site to escape from their Catholic persecutors.

The walk rolls on to Saignon, which is a peaceful little village that you can explore on foot, perched at the top of a hill overlooking the city of Apt. There is an easy access to the 'rock' - the old fortress area and viewpoint of Saignon, so do not hesitate

to climb to the top where there is a fabulous panorama. On good days you can see Mont Ventoux, the Lure Mountains, the Alpes de Haute Provence and the heights around Avignon! While walking through the narrow streets you will discover ancient fountains, picturesque shady squares and beautiful old houses with intricate doorways. Opposite the town hall there is a very pretty 12th Century Romanesque Church.

**Day 7: Saignon - Colorado Provençal - Saignon (5.30 h, 12km distance, 825 metres total ascent).**

Walk from your guesthouse to Rustrel, a tiny village nestled at the foot of the Plateau d'Albion (and back to Saignon by taxi) from where you visit the Colorado Provençal ochre quarry.

The exploitation of ochre began more than a century ago and Rustrel soon became an important production centre and part of the Industrial Revolution, thanks to its ferruginous minerals. Today the exploitation is almost at an end, although the 'Colorado Provençal' has received a

second lease of life, open to visitors who marvel at its colours and forms.

The Walk to Rustrel crosses the river Doa, and you pass a number of walkways that will take you towards an incredible succession of rusty-coloured rocks, golden cliffs and red earthen chimneys which rise majestically out of the vegetation. The village of Rustrel is dominated by a beautiful 17th century chateau... and it is also well known for its 'Cotes du Ventoux' wine! Guesthouse in Saignon.

**Day 8:** After breakfast transfer from Saignon to Apt by taxi for the local bus (included) to Avignon centre bus station, then take the train to Marseilles for flight.