

# The Best of Provence & the Riviera

**P**rovence is one of the world's most evocative regions—both the western area, known simply as Provence, whose landscapes and magical light have seduced innumerable artists, and the eastern coastal area, known as the Riviera, whose beach resorts have seduced innumerable hedonists. Provence and the Riviera are beautiful, diverse, and culturally rich, offering everything from fabulous beaches to amazing art museums, to white-hot nightlife, to a distinctive cuisine that blends the best of the mountains and the sea.

As you're heading to the south of France to luxuriate in life along the sunny Mediterranean—not to exhaust yourself making difficult decisions—we've searched out the best deals and once-in-a-lifetime experiences for this book. What follows in this chapter is our roster of the best of the best, the kind of discoveries we'd share with our closest friends.

## 1 The Best Travel Experiences

- **Partying in the Land of Festivals:**

Provence is called the Land of Festivals with good reason: It hosts some 500 with an astonishing 4,000 events. Of course, the ultimate example is the you-won't-believe-it-until-you've-seen-it Cannes Film Festival in May. July and August are the busiest months, as Aix-en-Provence, Toulon, and Nice host jazz festivals and Nîmes and Arles stage theater and dance performances. On May 16, St-Tropez's riotous *bravades* honor the saint in theory but are really just an excuse for revelry. Many festivals have deep roots in Provençal folklore, honoring the bounty of earth and sea: the wine harvest in numerous villages, the rice harvest in Languedoc's Camargue, and the apple harvest in Peyruis. Everything seems to end in a feast where the wine and *pastis* flow.

Contact any tourist office for the free booklet *Provence—Terre de Festivals*. See “When to Go” in chapter 2.

- **Absorbing a Unique Lifestyle:**

Provence and Languedoc share a uniquely Mediterranean lifestyle. Compared to the rest of France, the air here is drier, the sun beats down more strongly, and the light beloved by so many painters appears clearer. Nothing could be more typical than a game of boules played under shade trees on a hot afternoon in a Provençal village. This is a place that respects time-honored crafts; Picasso might have arrived here a painter, but he left a potter. And nothing is finer in life than to be invited into a Provençal kitchen—the heart of family life—and smell the aroma of herbs and wines cooking with the catch of the day. To walk in the gardens filled

with vegetables, flowers, and fruit trees is reason enough to visit. Attend a harvest, not just of grapes, but perhaps of linden blossoms. The dramatic landscape somehow seems at its most romantic when hit with the dreaded mistral winds. Discovering this land of ingrained traditions and making it your own is one of the great rewards of all European travel, especially if you go in the best months: May and September. See chapters 4 and 5.

- **Dining and Drinking Provence**

**Style:** Many people flock to the south of France specifically to enjoy *cuisine Provençale*, a Mediterranean mix of bold flavors with an emphasis on garlic, olive oil, and aromatic local herbs like thyme and basil. The world's greatest bouillabaisse is made here, especially in Marseille; Provençal lamb is among the best in France; and the vegetables (such as asparagus, eggplant, tomatoes, and artichokes) will make you realize that this is France's market garden. The regional wines, though not equaling those of Bordeaux and Burgundy, are the perfect accompaniment, ranging from the warm, full-bodied Châteauneuf-du-Pape to the rare, choice Bellet, produced on Nice's hill slopes.

- **Spending a Day in St-Rémy-de-Provence:**

Our favorite town in Provence is St-Rémy. To wander St-Rémy's streets is to recapture Provence's essence, especially its Vieille Ville (Old Town). After exploring its alleys, pause on one of its immaculate leafy squares. Then go in search of an art gallery or two and perhaps reward yourself with a painting and a memory. See "St-Rémy-de-Provence" in chapter 5.

- **Following in the Footsteps of the Great Artists:**

Modern art wasn't born in Provence, but artists from all over came here to paint its "glaring

festive light." The good news is that most of them left behind fabulous legacies. Perhaps it all began when Monet arrived with Renoir in 1883. In time, they were followed by a host of others, including Bonnard, who took a villa in St-Tropez. Van Gogh arrived in Arles in 1888, and Gauguin showed up a few months later. Even the Fauves sought out this region, notably Matisse, whose masterpiece is his chapel at Vence. Not long afterward, Picasso arrived at Antibes. Deeply jealous of Picasso and Matisse, Chagall moved to Vence and was later infuriated that the street on which he lived was renamed avenue Henri-Matisse. He got over it and lived and painted on the Riviera until he died at 97. See chapters 5, 6, and 7.

- **Sunning and Swimming on the Riviera Beaches:**

There are greater beaches but none more fabled, overcrowded though they are. Most of them are sandy, except those stretching from Antibes to the Italian frontier, including Nice's. These are shingled (covered with gravel or pebbles), but that doesn't stop the world from flocking to them. A beach mattress fits just fine on the shingles, and umbrellas are for rent when you want to escape the relentless sun. Along the Riviera, topless sunbathing is *de rigueur*. Legend has it that it began with Brigitte Bardot, who pulled off her bra and said, "Let's wake up sleepy St-Trop." Nudist beaches also exist, notably at Cap d'Agde and Port Cros. If you decide not to go topless or bottomless, you can still wear your most daring bikini or thong. See chapters 6 and 7. Also see "The Best Beaches," below.

- **Having Fun Day and Night:** If nothing else, the Riviera is about the art of entertainment, both high and low.

The Côte d'Azur offers not only beaches and racecars and yachts, but also fêtes and festivals and even bull-fights, real Spanish-style ones where the animals are killed, in the old Roman arenas at Arles and Nîmes. Glittering casinos are seemingly everywhere—Monte Carlo, Cannes, Cassis, and Beaulieu, to name a few. Many cities have elegant restaurants and opera houses with resident companies. But mainly the Riviera offers white-hot nightclubs and dance clubs for all sexes and sexual orientations, especially in Cannes, Nice, Monte Carlo, and St-Tropez. See chapters 6 and 7.

- **Breaking the Bank at Monte Carlo:** Few other casinos can match the excitement generated at the Monte Carlo Casino. The world's wealthy flocked to Monaco when the casino

was opened by Charles Garnier in 1878. But since 1891 much of the nonwealthy world has followed—even those who can't afford losses. During a 3-day gambling spree that year, Charles Deville Wells, an American, turned \$400 into \$40,000, an astonishing amount back then. His feat was immortalized in the song "The Man Who Broke the Bank at Monte Carlo." Even if you do no more today than play the slot machines, a visit to this casino will be a highlight of your trip as you bask amid the extravagant decor and under the gilded rococo ceilings. (Some not as lucky as Wells have leaped to their deaths from the casino windows or the "Suicide Terrace.") See "Monaco" in chapter 7.

## 2 The Best Romantic Getaways

- **Les Baux** (Provence): Les Baux stands in a spectacular position on a promontory of sheer rock ravines. In the distance across the plain, you can view the Val d'Enfer (Valley of Hell). After a turbulent history, the town today is one of the great escapes for the savvy French who can gaze from their windows on the thousands of olive trees (many planted by the Greeks) that produce the best oil in France. A pocket of posh, it has some of the country's grandest inns and finest cuisine. The most notable is **L'Oustau de Beaumanière**, Mausestrel-les-Alpilles (☎ 04-90-54-33-07)—after you and your loved one sample the ravioli with truffles, you'll understand why. See "Les Baux" in chapter 5.
- **Iles d'Hyères** (Provence): If an off-the-record weekend is what you have in mind, there's no better spot than what were known during the Renaissance as the "Iles d'Or" because of the golden

glow of the island rocks in the sun. This string of enchanting little islands is 39km (24 miles) east-southeast of the port of Toulon. The largest and westernmost island is Ile de Porquerolles, thickly covered with heather, eucalyptus, and exotic shrubs. Ile de Port-Cros is hilly and mysterious, with spring-fed lush vegetation. The best spot for a romantic retreat is on this island—**Le Manoir** (☎ 04-94-05-90-52), an 18th-century colonial-style mansion set in a park. See "Iles d'Hyères" in chapter 5.

- **Mougins** (Western Riviera): Only 8.1km (5 miles) north of Cannes, the once-fortified town of Mougins is a thousand years old, but never in its history has it been so popular as a place to enjoy the good life. Picasso, who could afford to live anywhere, chose a place nearby, Notre-Dame-de-Vie, to spend his last years. The wonderful old town is known for its cuisine, and Roger Vergé reigns

supreme at his elegant **Le Moulin de Mougins** (☎ 04-93-75-78-24). However, you can live for less at more secluded and less publicized oases. See “Mougins” in chapter 6.

- **Peillon** (Eastern Riviera): Of all the “perched” villages (*villages perchés*) along the Côte d’Azur, this fortified medieval town on a craggy mountain-top 19km (12 miles) northeast of Nice is our favorite. Peillon is the least spoiled of the perched villages and still boasts its medieval look, with covered alleys and extremely narrow streets. Tour buses avoid the place, but artists and writers flock there (we once spotted Françoise Sagan) to escape the mad carnival of the Riviera. For a cozy hideaway with your significant other, try the **Auberge de la Madone**

(☎ 04-93-79-91-17). Dinner for two on the terrace set among olive trees is the best way to start a romantic evening. See “Peillon” in chapter 7.

- **Roquebrune and Cap-Martin** (Eastern Riviera): Along the Grande Corniche, Roquebrune is one of the most charming of the Côte d’Azur’s villages, and its satellite resort of Cap-Martin occupies a lovely wooded peninsula. Between Monaco and Menton, these two have long been romantic retreats. The best choice for hiding away with that certain someone is the **Hôtel Vista Palace**, Grande Corniche (☎ 04-92-10-40-00), a modern luxury hotel clinging giddily to a cliff side over Monte Carlo. See “Roquebrune & Cap-Martin” in chapter 7.

### 3 The Most Dramatic Countryside Drives

- **From Carcassonne to Albi** (Languedoc-Roussillon): From the walled city of Carcassonne, D118 takes you north into the Montagne Noire (Black Mountains), which are both arid and lush in parts, marking the southeastern extension of the Massif Central. You can spend a full day here exploring the Parc Régional du Haut-Languedoc, crowned by the 1,110m (3,700-ft.) Pic de Noire. You can base yourself in the old wool town of Mazamet and have lunch here before continuing northwest on N112 to Castres, with its Goya Museum. Then you can continue exploring the surrounding area or head for Albi, 40km (25 miles) away, the hometown of Toulouse-Lautrec. See chapter 4.
- **From St-Rémy-de-Provence to Eygalières** (Provence): A 64km (40-mile) drive northeast of Arles takes you into some of the most dramatic and forlorn countryside in Provence, even to the Val d’Enfer (Valley of Hell). At the beginning of the tour, you pass

Roman monuments before climbing into the hills, with their distant views of the Parc Naturel Régional de la Camargue and Mont Ventoux. The tour also takes you to Les Baux, the most dramatically situated town in Provence and today a gourmet citadel. After many turns and twists, you eventually reach the ancient village of Eygalières, with its medieval castle and church. See chapter 5.

- **Along the Ours Peak Road** (Western Riviera): The best driving tour in the area starts in St-Raphaël and lasts for only 56km (35 miles), but because the terrain is so rough and torturous, allow at least 3 hours. The views are among the most dramatic along the Côte d’Azur, as you traverse a backdrop of the red porphyry slopes of Rastel d’Agay. Along the way, you’ll go through the passes of Evêque and Lentisques. Eventually, hairpin bends in the road lead to the summit of Ours Peak (Pic de l’Ours), at 488m (1,627 ft.), and you’re

rewarded with a superb panorama. See chapter 6.

- **From Vence to Grasse** (Western and Eastern Riviera): After calling on the Matisse chapel in Vence, you can take D2210 through some of the most luxuriant countryside along the French Riviera, with views of the Gorges du Loup, and a stopover in the artisans' village of Tourrettes-sur-Loup, where the main street is filled with the ateliers of craftspeople. As you continue, follow the signs to Point-du-Loup and you'll be rewarded with a panorama of waterfalls; later you will pass fields of flowers that eventually lead to the perfume center of Grasse. See chapter 7.

- **From Nice to Mont Chauve** (Eastern Riviera): The hilltops surrounding Nice have long been known for their colorful villages and rural scenery. In our view, the best countryside and the best panoramas unfold by driving to Mont Chauve (Bald Mountain) across a circuit that traverses 53km (33 miles). You can stop at several villages along the way, including Aspremont and Tourette-Levens. You'll even pass the Gorges du Gabres, with its sheer walls of limestone, before reaching the enchanting village of Falicon. Eventually you'll come to Mont Chauve. Allow at least 30 minutes to hike to the summit. See chapter 7.

## 4 The Best Beaches

Read below to discover the best beaches throughout Provence and the Riviera. See the chapters indicated to find out more about lodging, dining, and other activities in the general vicinity of these great strips of sand.

- **La Côte Vermeille** (Languedoc-Roussillon): In contrast to the eastern Riviera's pebbly beaches, the Côte Vermeille is filled with sand stretching toward Spain's Costa Brava. The best place for fun in the sun is the 11km (6-mile) beach between the resorts of Leucate-Plage and Le Barcarès in the Pyrénées-Orientales district near Perpignan. The "Vermilion Coast" takes its name from the red-clay soil studded with the ubiquitous olive groves. Henri Matisse was so taken with the light on this coast that he painted it. See chapter 4.
- **Beaches of Ile de Porquerolles** (Provence): These beaches lie 15 minutes by ferry from the Giens peninsula east of Toulon. One of the Iles d'Hyères, Porquerolles is only 8.1km (5 miles) long and some 2.4km (1½ miles) across and enjoys national park

status. Its beaches, along the northern coast facing the mainland, get 275 days of sunshine annually. There are several white-sand beaches; the best are **Plage d'Argent**, **Plage de la Courtade**, and **Plage de Notre-Dame**. See "Iles d'Hyères" in chapter 5.

- **Plage de Tahiti** (St-Tropez, Western Riviera): And God created woman and man and all the other critters found on this sizzling sandy beach outside St-Tropez. Tahiti is France's most infamous beach, mainly because of all the topless or bottomless action going on. Ever since the days of Brigitte Bardot, this beach has been a favorite of movie stars. It's very cruisy and animated, with a French nonchalance about nudity. If you bother to wear a bikini, it should be only the most daring. See "St-Tropez" in chapter 6.
- **Plage Port Grimaud** (St-Tropez, Western Riviera): This long golden-sand beach is set against the backdrop of the urban architect François Sperry's *cité lacustre*, facing St-Tropez. Sperry created this 98-hectare (247-acre) marine village inspired by an

ancient fishing village. The world has since flocked to Port Grimaud and its beach; homeowner Joan Collins comes here to hide from the paparazzi. Some of the Riviera's most expensive yachts are tied up in the harbor. This beach isn't as decadent as those at St-Trop, but it does pick up the "overflow" on the see-and-be-seen circuit. See "St-Tropez" in chapter 6.

- **The Beaches at Cannes** (Western Riviera): From the Palais des Festivals and west to Mandelieu, the beach at Cannes has real sand, not pebbles as at Nice. This beach resort offers a movable feast of high-fashion swimsuits. Ever since the 1920s, the word on the beach here has been: "Menton's dowdy. Monte's brass. Nice is rowdy. Cannes is class!" Along the fabled promenade, La Croisette, the white sands are littered with sun beds and parasols rented at the beach concessions. The beach is actually divided

into 32 sections, our favorites being **Plages Gazagnaire, Le Zénith,** and **Waikiki.** Some of the beaches are privately run, but the best public beach is in front of the Palais des Festivals. See "Cannes" in chapter 6.

- **Monte-Carlo Beach** (at the Monaco border, Eastern Riviera): This beach, once frequented by Princess Grace, is actually on French soil. Of all the Riviera's beaches, this is the most fashionable, even though its sands are imported. The property adjoins the ultrachic **Monte-Carlo Beach Hotel**, 22 av. Princesse-Grace (☎ 92-16-25-25). The great months to be here are July and August, when you never know who's likely to be sharing the sands with you—perhaps Luciano Pavarotti or Claudia Schiffer. The main topic on the beach? Both legal and funny money. See "Monaco" in chapter 7.

## 5 The Best Offbeat Experiences

- **Spending a Night in Aigues-Mortes** (Languedoc-Roussillon): St. Louis sailed from this port to fight in the Crusades to the east. He died in Tunis in 1270, but his successor, Philip III, held this port, the only stretch of the Mediterranean in French hands at the time. Great walls were built around the town, and ships all the way from Antioch used to anchor here. But beginning around the mid-14th century, Aigues-Mortes began to live up to its name of "dead waters," as the harbor filled with silt and the waters receded. Today it sits marooned in time and space right in the muck of the advancing Rhône delta. Nothing along the coast is as evocative of the Middle Ages as this town, where you can walk along its walls and slumber

in one of its inns. See "Aigues-Mortes" in chapter 4.

- **Checking In and Stripping Down** (Cap d'Agde, Languedoc-Roussillon): Except in foul weather, it's compulsory to walk around nude in the holiday town on the outskirts of Cap d'Agde. You'll have to check your apparel at the gate. Along the Languedoc coast, between the Rhône delta and Béziers, Cap d'Agde was constructed like a pastiche of a local fishing village, similar to Port Grimaud near St-Tropez. At its outskirts is a town with supermarkets, nightclubs, a casino, and rooms for 20,000 bodies—nude bodies. See "Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité . . . Nudité" in chapter 4.
- **Exploring Massif des Calanques** (between Marseille and Cassis, Provence): At the old fishing port of

Cassis, with its white cliffs and beaches that were a favorite of Fauve painters, you can rent a boat and explore the Calanques, small fjords along the rugged coast. Covered with gorse and heather, the white cliffs form a backdrop for this adventure. By car from Cassis, you can drive to the creek of Port Miou, with its rock quarries. To reach the Port Pin and

En Vau creeks farther west, you must travel on foot (trails are well sign-posted). You can, however, take one of the boat excursions that leave regularly from Cassis. If you go on your own (not on the boat), you can take a picnic and spend the day skinny-dipping in these cool crystal waters. See “Exploring the Massif des Calanques” in chapter 5.

## 6 The Best Small Towns

- **Cordes-sur-Ciel** (Languedoc-Roussillon): Perched like an eagle’s nest on a hilltop, Cordes is an arts-and-crafts town, its ancient houses on narrow streets filled with artisans plying their trades. Once fabled in France for the brilliance of its silks, today it’s a sleepy town 25km (16 miles) northwest of Albi, the city of Toulouse-Lautrec. Ideally, you should visit Cordes as a side trip from Albi, but you might become enchanted with the place and decide to stop over in this town of a hundred Gothic arches. See “Cordes-sur-Ciel” in chapter 4.
- **Uzès** (Provence): Uzès is a gem, a bit of a time capsule with lofty towers and narrow streets. Racine once lived here and was inspired by the town to write his only comedy, *Les Plaideurs*. André Gide also found a home in this “dream of the Middle Ages.” Once Louis XIII called Uzès “the premier duchy of France.” You can see why by staying at the stately 18th-century **Château d’Arpaillargues**. See “Uzès” in chapter 5.
- **Gordes** (Provence): One of the best known of Provence’s hill villages, Gordes, east of Avignon, is deservedly called *le plus beau village de France*. Today an escape for in-the-know Parisians, it’s a town of silk painters, weavers, and potters. The setting is

bucolic, between the Coulon valley and the Vaucluse plateau. Houses built of golden stone rise to the Renaissance château crowning the top. The late artist Victor Vasarely lived here in a fortified château that has been turned into a museum displaying much of his work. See “Gordes” in chapter 5.

- **Roussillon** (Provence): Northeast of Gordes, Roussillon stands on a hilltop in the heart of “ocher country,” where the earth is a bright red (*roussillon* means “russet”). This ancient village boasts houses in every shade of burnt orange, dusty pink, and russet red—they take on a particular brilliance at sunset. Roussillon, however, is no longer the sleepy village described in Laurence Wylie’s *A Village in the Vaucluse*. Artists, writers, and trendy Parisians have discovered its charms, and today many use it as their second home. See “Roussillon & Bonnieux” in chapter 5.
- **Roquebrune** (Eastern Riviera): This medieval hill village southwest of Menton is the finest along the Côte d’Azur. It has been extensively restored, and not even the souvenir shops can spoil its charm. Steep stairways and alleys lead up to its feudal castle crowning the village. But before heading here, take in rue Moncollet, flanked by houses from

the Middle Ages. This castle, dating from the 10th century, is the oldest in France—in fact, it's the only

Carolingian castle left standing. See “Roquebrune & Cap-Martin” in chapter 7.

## 7 The Best Châteaux & Palaces

- **Château d'If** (off Marseille, Provence): One of France's most notorious fortresses, this was the famous state prison whose mysterious guest was the Man in the Iron Mask. Alexandre Dumas père's *Count of Monte Cristo* made the legend famous around the world. It doesn't really matter that the story was apocryphal: People flock here because they believe it, just as they go to Verona to see where Romeo and Juliet lived and loved and died. The château was built by François I in 1524 as part of the defenses of Marseille. To reach it, you take a boat in the harbor to the islet 3.2km (2 miles) offshore. See “Marseille” in chapter 5.
- **Palais des Papes** (Avignon, Provence): This was the seat of Avignon's brief golden age as the capital of Christendom. From 1352 to 1377, seven popes—all French—ruled here, a period called “the Babylonian Captivity.” And they lived with pomp and circumstance, knowing “fleshly weaknesses.” The Italian poet Petrarch denounced the palace as “the shame of mankind, a sink of vice.” Even after Gregory XI was persuaded to return to Rome, some cardinals remained, electing their own pope or “anti-pope,” who was finally expelled by force in 1403. See p. 139.
- **Château de la Napoule** (La Napoule, Western Riviera): The Riviera's most eccentric château is also the most fascinating. This great medieval castle was purchased in 1917 by American sculptor Henry Clews, heir to a banking fortune. He lived, worked, and was buried here in 1937. In this castle, Clews created his own grotesque menagerie—scorpions, pelicans, gnomes, monkeys, lizards, whatever came to his tortured mind. His view of feminism? A distorted suffragette depicted in his *Cat Woman*. He likened himself to Don Quixote. See p. 243.
- **Les Grands Appartements du Palais** (Monte Carlo, Monaco, Eastern Riviera): The world has known greater palaces, but this Italianate one on “The Rock” houses the man who presides over the tiny but incredibly rich principality of Monaco, Europe's second-smallest state. In 2005, Prince Rainier III, Europe's longest-reigning monarch, passed away, leaving the throne to Prince Albert. When the prince is here, a flag flies. You can watch the changing of the guard every day at 11:55am. The throne room is decorated with paintings by Holbein, Brueghel, and others, and in one wing of the palace is a museum devoted to souvenirs of Napoleon. See p. 338.
- **Villa Kérylos** (Beaulieu, Eastern Riviera): This villa is a faithful reconstruction of an ancient Greek palace, built between 1902 and 1908 by the archaeologist Théodore Reinach. Reinach, a bit of an eccentric, lived here for 20 years, preferring to take baths and eat and dress with his male friends (who pretended to be Athenian citizens), while segregating the women to separate suites. Designated a historic monument of France, with its white, yellow, and lavender Italian marble and its ivory and bronze copies of vases and mosaics, Kérylos is a visual knockout. The parties that went on here are legendary. See “Beaulieu” in chapter 7.



## 8 The Best Museums

- **Musée Toulouse-Lautrec** (Albi, Languedoc-Roussillon): This museum displays the world's greatest collection from this crippled genius, who immortalized cancan dancers, café demimonde, and prostitutes. In the brooding 13th-century Palais de la Berbie in the artist's hometown, the "red city" of Albi, this museum takes you into the special but tortured world of Toulouse-Lautrec. Particularly memorable are the posters that marked the beginning of an entirely new art form. When he died, his family donated the works remaining in his studio. See p. 89.
- **Musée Picasso** (Antibes, Western Riviera): After the bleak war years in Paris, Picasso returned to the Mediterranean in 1945. He didn't have a studio, so the curator of this museum offered him space. Picasso labored here for several months—it was one of his most creative periods. At the end of his stay, he astonished the curator by leaving his entire output on permanent loan to the museum, along with some 200 ceramics he produced at Vallauris. This museum reveals Picasso in an exuberant mood, as evoked by his fauns and goats in cubist style, his still lifes of sea urchins, and his masterful *Ulysses et ses Sirènes*. A much-reproduced photograph displayed here shows him holding a sunshade for his lover, Françoise Gilot. See p. 278.
- **Musée National Fernand-Léger** (Biot, Eastern Riviera): Ridiculed as a Tubist, Léger survived many of his most outspoken critics and went on to win great fame. This museum was built by Léger's widow, Nadia, after his death in 1955, and it became one of the first in France dedicated to a single artist. It owns some 300 of Léger's highly original works. You wander into a dazzling array of robot-like figures, girders, machines, cogs, and cubes. The museum allows you to witness how he changed over the years, dabbling first in Impressionism, as shown by his 1905 *Portrait de l'oncle*. Our favorite here—and one of our favorite artworks along the Riviera—is Léger's *Mona Lisa*, contemplating a set of keys with a wide-mouthed fish dangling at an angle over her head. See p. 284.
- **Fondation Maeght** (St-Paul-de-Vence, Eastern Riviera): One of Europe's greatest modern art museums, this foundation is remarkable for both its setting and its art. Built in 1964, the avant-garde building boasts a touch of fantasy, topped by two inverted domes. The colorful canvases radiate with the joy of life. All your favorites are likely to be here: Bonnard, Braque, Soulages, Chagall, Kandinsky, and more. Stunningly designed is a terraced garden that's a setting for Calder murals, Hepworth sculptures, and the fanciful fountains and colorful mosaics of Miró. A courtyard is peopled with Giacometti figures that look like gigantic emaciated chessmen. See p. 287.
- **Musée des Beaux-Arts** (Nice, Eastern Riviera): In the former home of the Ukrainian Princess Kotchubey, the collection comes as an unexpected delight, with not only many Belle Epoque paintings but also modern works, including an impressive number by Sisley, Braque, Degas, and Monet, plus Picasso ceramics. There's whimsy, too, especially in the sugar-sweet canvases by Jules Chéret, who died in Nice in 1932. Well represented also are the Van Loo family, a clan of Dutch descent whose members worked in Nice. The gallery of sculptors honors Rude, Rodin, and J. B. Carpeaux. See p. 303.

- **Musée Ile-de-France** (St-Jean-Cap-Ferrat, Eastern Riviera): Baronne Ephrussi de Rothschild left a treasure trove of art and artifacts to the Institut de France on her death in 1934. The Villa Ephrussi, the 1912 palace that contains these pieces, reveals what a woman with unlimited wealth and highly eclectic tastes can collect.

It's all here: paintings by Carpaccio and other masters of the Venetian Renaissance; canvases by Sisley, Renoir, and Monet; Ming vases; Dresden porcelain; and more. An eccentric, she named her house after the ocean liner *Ile de France* and insisted that her 35 gardeners dress as sailors. See p. 324.

## 9 The Best Cathedrals & Churches

- **Basilique St-Sernin** (Toulouse, Languedoc-Roussillon): Consecrated in 1096, this is the largest and finest Romanesque church extant. It was built to honor the memory of a Gaulish martyr, St. Sernin, and was for a long time a major stop on the pilgrimage route to Santiago de Compostela in Spain. The octagonal bell tower is particularly evocative, with five levels of twin brick arches. Unusual for a Romanesque church, St-Sernin has five naves. The crypt, where the saint is buried, is a treasure trove of ecclesiastical artifacts, some from the days of Charlemagne. See p. 74.
- **Cathédrale St-Jean** (Perpignan, Languedoc-Roussillon): In 1324, Sancho of Aragón began this cathedral, but the consecration didn't come until its completion in 1509. Despite the different builders and architects over the decades, it emerged as one of Languedoc's most evocative cathedrals. The bell tower contains a great bell that dates from the 1400s. The single nave is typical of church construction in the Middle Ages and is enhanced by the altarpieces of the north chapels and the high altar, the work of the 1400s and the 1500s. See p. 100.
- **Cathédrale St-Just** (Narbonne, Languedoc-Roussillon): Though construction on this cathedral, begun in 1272, was never completed, it's an

enduring landmark. Construction had to be halted 82 years later to prevent breaching the city's ancient ramparts to make room for the nave. In High Gothic style, the vaulting in the choir soars to 130 feet. Battlements and loopholes crown the towering arches of the apse. The cathedral's greatest treasure is the evocative *Tapestry of the Creation*, woven in silk and gold thread. See p. 109.

- **Cathédrale Notre-Dame des Doms** (Avignon, Provence): Next to the Palais des Papes, this was a luminous Romanesque structure before baroque artists took over. It was partially reconstructed from the 14th through the 17th century. In 1859, it was topped by a tall gilded statue of the Virgin, which earned it harsh criticism from many architectural critics. The cathedral houses the tombs of two popes, John XXII and Benedict XII. You'd think this cathedral would be more impressive because of its role in papal history, but it appears that far more time and money went into the construction of the papal palace. Nevertheless, the cathedral reigned during the heyday of Avignon. See p. 141.
- **Basilique St-Victor** (Marseille, Provence): This is one of France's most ancient churches, first built in the 5th century by St. Cassianus to honor St. Victor, a 3rd-century martyr. The saint's church was destroyed

by the Saracens, except for the crypt. In the 11th and 12th centuries, a fortified Gothic church was erected. In the crypt are both pagan and early

Christian sarcophagi; those depicting the convening of the Apostles and the Companions of St. Maurice are justly renowned. See p. 195.

## 10 The Best Vineyards

Southern France is home to thousands of vineyards, many of which are somewhat anonymous agrarian bureaucracies known as *cooperatives*. Employees at these cooperatives tend to be less enthusiastic about showing off their product than those who work at true vineyards, where the person pouring your *dégustation des vins* might be the son or daughter of one of the owners. At least in southern France, don't assume that just because the word *Château* appears in the name that there'll be a magnificent historic residence associated with the property. In some cases, the crenellated battlement you're looking for might be nothing more than a feudal ruin.

We selected the vineyards below because of the emotional involvement of their (private) owners, their degree of prestige, and, in many cases, their architectural interest. We've provided you with all of the information you need to visit the vineyards below, but see "A Taste of Provence" in the appendix for more information about the wines produced in these areas.

- **Château de Simone**, 13590 Meyreuil (© 04-42-66-92-58; www.chateau-simone.fr): This well-respected vintner lies less than .5km (½ mile) north of Aix-en-Provence. The vineyards surround a small 18th-century palace that might have been transported unchanged from *La Belle du bois dormant*. You can't visit the interior, but you can buy bottles of the recent crops of reds, rosés, and whites for between 25€ (\$33) and 28€ (\$36) each. Because production at this vineyard is relatively small, you're limited

to purchases of between 3 and 12 bottles, depending on the vintage. Advance notification is important. From Aix, take N7 toward Nice and then follow the signs to Trois Sautets.

- **Château Virant**, R.D. 10, 13680 Lançon-de-Provence (© 04-90-42-44-47; www.chateauvirant.com): Set 23km (14 miles) west of Aix-en-Provence and 35km (22 miles) north of Marseille, and named after a nearby rock whose ruined feudal fortress is barely standing, this vineyard produces Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée–designated Côteaux d'Aix-en-Provence, as well as a translucent brand of olive oil from fruit grown on the property. The English-speaking Cheylan family showcases a labyrinth of cellars dating from 1630 and 1890. Tours and tastings can be arranged. The most expensive bottle here costs 14€ (\$18). Ask for an explanation of their trademark *vin cuit* (cooked wine) *de Virant*, which is popular around these parts as a beverage at Christmastime. Notification in advance of your visit is wise.
- **Château de Calissanne**, R.D. 10, 13680 Lançon-de-Provence (© 04-90-42-63-03; www.calissanne.fr): On the premises is a substantial 18th-century white-stone manor house sporting very old terra-cotta tiles and a sense of the *ancien régime*. Even older is the Gallo-Roman *oppidum Constantine*, a sprawling ruined fortress that you can visit if you obtain a special pass from the sales staff. Set amid the vineyards, it evokes old Provence. The white, rosé, and red Côteaux

d'Aix-en-Provence and the two grades of olive oil produced by the property are sold in an outbuilding. Wine sells for less than 18€ (\$23) per bottle. Advance reservations are vital. You'll find this place clearly signposted in Lançon-de-Provence, nearly adjacent to the above-mentioned Château Virant.

- **Château d'Aqueria**, Route de Roquemaure, 30126 Tavel (☎ 04-66-50-04-56; www.aqueria.com): Wines produced near the Provençal town of Tavel are considered some of the finest rosés in the world, and vintners here are expert at the fermentation of a brand that's sought after by wine lovers from as far away as Paris. An 18th-century château on the premises can be viewed only from the outside, and cellars and wine shops sell bottles of the famous pink wine at prices that rarely exceed 11€ (\$14) a bottle. To reach it, drive 6km (4 miles) northwest of Avignon along the Route de Bagnols, following the signs to Tavel.
- **Château de Fonscolombe** (☎ 04-42-61-70-01) and **Château de La Coste** (☎ 04-42-61-89-98), 13610 Le Puy Ste-Réparate: These vineyards are adjacent to each other, 20km (13 miles) north of Aix-en-Provence. Fonscolombe has an exterior-only view of an 18th-century manor house and its garden, and offers tours of a modern facility of interest to wine-industry professionals. LaCoste is smaller and less state of the art, but it offers an exterior view of a stone-sided villa that was built for a cardinal during the reign of the popes in Avignon. At either of these outfits, you can buy their red, white, and rosé wines, the most expensive of which sells for only 12€ (\$16). Advance notification is required. From Aix, take the A51 in

the direction of Sisteron, exiting at exit 12 toward Le Puy Ste-Réparate.

- **Domaine de Fontavin**, 1468 route de la Plaine, 84350 Courthézon (☎ 04-90-70-72-14; www.fontavin.com): Set 10km (6 miles) north of Carpentras, this is one of the leading producers of the heady, sweet dessert wine known as Muscat des Baumes de Venise. Because the organization here dates only from 1989, there's nothing particularly noteworthy in terms of architecture on-site. But oenophiles who come to this place appreciate its proximity to some of the most legendary grapevines in the French-speaking world. Bottles of the sweet elixir are sold at a price that rarely exceeds 15€ (\$20) each. Follow the N7 from Carpentras in the direction of Orange and Courthézon.
- **Château de Coussin**, 1468 route de la Plain, 13530 Trets (☎ 04-90-70-72-14; www.sumeire.com): This property, 16km (10 miles) east of Aix-en-Provence, is centered on a 16th-century manor whose stone facade bears geometric reliefs associated with Renaissance-era construction in Provence. The vineyards are scattered over three neighboring regions and have been owned by the same family for nearly a century. The château's interior (it contains a vaulted cloister) can be visited only with the hard-to-obtain permission of the owners, but the overview of the winemaking industry as seen within its bottling facility is worth the trip. Bottles sell for a maximum of 36€ (\$47) each, and in some cases for much less.
- On a property that's almost immediately adjacent, an amiable competitor also offers wine tours to those who phone in advance: **Château de Grand'Boise**, 13530 Trets (☎ 04-42-29-22-95), whose venerable 19th-century château is the centerpiece of

vineyards, olive groves, forests, and hunting preserves. The château itself, as well as the organization's cellars, can be visited if you phone in advance for an appointment. Bottles of red, white, and rosé sell for less than 12€ (\$16) each.

- **Château de Capitou**, Route de Gruissan, 1100 Narbonne (☎ 04-68-49-23-30; www.chateau-capitou.com): Set farther to the west than most of the other vineyards mentioned within this survey, Château de Capitou produces reds (“La Clape

des Rocailles”), whites, and rosés that usually sell for 5.40€ to 8.50€ (\$7–\$11) a bottle but, in some rare instances, go as high as 36€ (\$47). Nestled amid its vineyards is a 19th-century manor house that can be visited if special permission is granted in advance from the owners. More easily accessible are the cellars, which lie within a nearby annex. Call in advance of your arrival. From Narbonne, drive 5km (3 miles) east, following the D32 (Route de Gruissan).

## 11 The Best Luxury Hotels

- **InterContinental Carlton Cannes** (Western Riviera; ☎ 04-93-06-40-06): A World War II Allied commander issued orders to bombers to avoid hitting the Carlton “because it’s such a good hotel.” The 1912 hotel survived the attack and today is at its most frenzied during the annual film festival. Taste and subtlety aren’t what the Carlton is about—it’s all glitter, glitterati, and glamour, the most splendid of the area’s architectural “wedding cakes.” The white-turreted doyenne presides over La Croisette like some permanent sand castle. See p. 254.
- **Hôtel du Cap-Eden Roc** (Cap d’Antibes, Western Riviera; ☎ 04-93-61-39-01): Looming large in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *Tender Is the Night*, this is the most stylish of the Côte’s luxury palaces, standing at the tip of the Cap d’Antibes peninsula in its own manicured garden. The hotel reflects the opulence of a bygone era and has catered to the rich and famous since it opened in 1870. See p. 278.
- **Hôtel Negresco** (Nice, Eastern Riviera; ☎ 04-93-16-64-00): An aging Lillie Langtry sitting alone in the lobby, her once-great beauty camouflaged by a black veil, is but one of

the many memories of this nostalgic favorite. Self-made millionaires and wannabes rub shoulders at this 1906 landmark. We could write a book about the Négresco, but here we’ll give only two interesting facts: The carpet in the lobby is the largest ever made by the Savonnerie factory (the cost was about one-tenth the cost of the hotel), and the main chandelier was commissioned from Baccarat by Tsar Nicholas II. See p. 306.

- **Grand Hôtel du Cap-Ferrat** (St-Jean-Cap-Ferrat, Eastern Riviera; ☎ 04-93-76-50-52): The Grand Hôtel, built in 1908, competes with the Hôtel du Cap-Eden Roc as the Riviera’s most opulent. Set in a well-manicured garden, it was once a winter haven for royalty. This pocket of posh has it all, including a private beach club with a heated seawater pool and a Michelin-starred restaurant utilizing market-fresh ingredients. See p. 324.
- **Hostellerie du Château de la Chèvre d’Or** (Eze, Eastern Riviera; ☎ 04-92-10-66-66): In striking contrast to the palaces above, this gem of an inn lies in a medieval village 396m (1,300 ft.) above sea level. Following in the footsteps of former guests like Roger

Moore and Elizabeth Taylor, you can stay in this artistically converted medieval château. All its elegant rooms open onto vistas of the Mediterranean. Everything here has a refreshingly rustic appeal rather than false glitter. As the paparazzi catch you sipping a champagne cocktail by the pool, you'll know you've achieved Côte d'Azur chic. See p. 332.

- **Hôtel de Paris** (Monte Carlo, Monaco, Eastern Riviera; ☎ 92-16-30-00): The 19th-century aristocracy flocked here, and though the hotel

isn't quite that fashionable anymore, it's still going strong. Onassis, Sinatra, and Churchill long ago checked out, but today's movers and shakers still pull up in limousines with tons of luggage. This luxury palace boasts two Michelin-starred restaurants, the more celebrated of which is Le Louis XV, offering the sublime specialties of Alain Ducasse. Le Grill boasts Ligurian-Niçois cooking, a retractable roof, and a wraparound view of the sea. See p. 343.

## 12 The Best Hotel Bargains

- **La Réserve** (Albi, Languedoc-Roussillon; ☎ 05-63-60-80-80): La Réserve's design approximates a *mas provençal*, the kind of severely dignified farmhouse usually surrounded by scrublands, vineyards, olive groves, and cypresses. It's less expensive than many of the luxurious hideaways along the nearby Côte d'Azur and has the added benefit of lying just outside the center of one of our favorite fortified sites in Europe, the medieval town of Albi. See p. 90.
- **Hôtel Renaissance** (Castres, Languedoc-Roussillon; ☎ 05-63-59-30-42): In the quaint town of Castres, with its celebrated Musée Goya, this hotel is a good introduction to the bargains awaiting you in provincial France. Built in the 1600s as a courthouse, it was long ago converted from a dilapidated site into a hotel of discretion and charm—all at an affordable price, even if you opt for a suite. Some rooms have exposed timbers, and you'll sleep in grand but rustic comfort. See p. 92.
- **Le Donjon et Les Remparts** (Carcassonne, Languedoc-Roussillon; ☎ 800/528-1234 in the U.S. and Canada, or 04-68-11-23-00): Built

into the solid bulwarks of Carcassonne, one of France's most perfectly preserved medieval towns, is this small-scale hotel whose well-appointed furnishings provide a vivid contrast to the crude stone shell that contains them. A stay here truly allows you personal contact with a site that provoked bloody battles between medieval armies. See p. 96.

- **Hôtel du Palais** (Montpellier, Languedoc-Roussillon; ☎ 04-67-60-47-38): In the old town, in a labyrinth of narrow streets, this hotel dates from the late 18th century but has been successfully modernized to receive guests today at prices that are within the range of most travelers' budgets. The rooms are cozily arranged, and the hotel has a special French charm. It's one of the most historic hotels in town, and the bedrooms are relatively large, ideal for a short or even a long visit. See p. 119.
- **Hôtel Danieli** (Avignon, Provence; ☎ 04-90-86-46-82): Built during the reign of Napoleon, this 29-room gem is classified a historic monument. Small and informal, it has Italian flair but Provençal furnishings. The tile floors, chiseled stone, and

baronial stone staircase add style in a town where too many budget hotels are bleak. See p. 146.

- **Hôtel d'Arlatan** (Arles, Provence; ☎ 04-90-93-56-66): At reasonable rates, you can stay in one of Provence's most charming cities at the former residence of the comtes d'Arlatan de Beaumont, built in the 15th century on the ruins of an old palace. Near the historic place du Forum, this small hotel has been run by the same family since 1920. The rooms are furnished with Provençal antiques, and the antique tapestries are grace notes. See p. 157.

- **Hôtel Clair Logis** (St-Jean-Cap-Ferrat, Eastern Riviera; ☎ 04-93-76-51-81): The real estate surrounding this converted 19th-century villa is among Europe's most expensive; nonetheless, the hotel manages to keep its prices under levels that really hurt. If you opt for one of the pleasant rooms (each named after a flower that thrives in the garden), you'll be among prestigious predecessors: Even General de Gaulle, who knew the value of a *centime* and *sou*, selected it for his retreats. See p. 325.

### 13 The Best Luxury Restaurants

- **Le Languedoc** (Carcassonne, Languedoc-Roussillon; ☎ 04-68-25-22-17): Acclaimed chef Didier Faugeras is the creative force behind this century-old dining room that serves some of the finest regional specialties in the area. Its most famous dish is *cassoulet au confit de canard*, a casserole with the duck meat cooked in its own fat. See p. 98.
- **Le Jardin des Sens** (Montpellier, Languedoc-Roussillon; ☎ 04-99-58-38-38): Twins Laurent and Jacques Pourcel have set off a culinary storm in Montpellier. Michelin has bestowed two stars on them, the same rating it gives to Ducasse at his Monaco citadel. Postnouvelle reigns supreme, and both men know how to turn the bounty of Languedoc into meals sublime in flavor and texture. Though inspired by other chefs, they now feel free to let their imaginations roam. The results are often stunning, like the fricassée of langoustines and lamb sweetbreads. See p. 120.
- **Christian Etienne** (Avignon, Provence; ☎ 04-90-86-16-50): In a house as old as the nearby papal palace, Etienne reigns as Avignon's

culinary star. A chef of imagination and discretion, he has a magical hand, reinterpreting and improving French cuisine. He keeps a short menu so that he can give special care and attention to each dish. His menu is often themed—one might be devoted to the tomato. Save room for his chocolate/pine-nut cake, something of a local legend. See p. 147.

- **Oustaù de Beaumanière** (Les Baux, Provence; ☎ 04-90-54-33-07): This Relais & Châteaux occupies an old Provençal farmhouse. Founded in 1945 by the late Raymond Thuilier, the hotel's restaurant was once touted as France's greatest. It might long ago have lost that lofty position, but it continues to tantalize today's palates. Thuilier's heirs carry on admirably as they reinvent and reinterpret some of the great Provençal recipes. At the foot of a cliff, you dine in Renaissance charm, enjoying often flawless meals from the bounty of Provence. See p. 161.
- **Chantecler** (Nice, Eastern Riviera; ☎ 04-93-16-64-00): The most prestigious restaurant in Nice, and the most intensely cultivated, Chantecler

is currently in the hands of Alain Llorca, who's attracting the area's demanding gourmets and gourmands. You dine in a monument to turn-of-the-20th-century extravagance, and the menu is attuned to the seasons and to quality ingredients. A true taste of the country is evident in the fresh asparagus, black truffles, sun-dried tomatoes, and beignets of fresh vegetables—all deftly handled by a chef on the rise. See p. 316.

- **Le Louis XV** (Monte Carlo, Monaco; ☎ 92-16-29-76): Maybe because he was spending too much time at his

other restaurants in New York or Paris, the 2001 Michelin guide lowered chef Alain Ducasse's rating here from three stars to two stars. The good news is that even without Michelin's wholehearted approval, this restaurant is just as good as it's always been, whether Ducasse shows up or not. The kitchen specializes in the ultimate blending of the flavors of Liguria with the tastes and aromas of Provence and Tuscany. Yes, Ducasse dares grace the local macaroni gratin with truffles. See p. 346.

## 14 The Best Deals on Dining

- **Emile** (Toulouse, Languedoc-Roussillon; ☎ 05-61-21-05-56): On one of the most beautiful old squares of Toulouse, this restaurant serves one of the finest regional cuisines in the area, all at an affordable price. The *casoulet Toulousain* is hailed as the town's best. The flower-filled terrace is a magnet in the summer. See p. 81.
- **Le Bistro Latin** (Aix-en-Provence, Provence; ☎ 04-42-38-22-88): The economic virtue of this Provençal restaurant lies in its fixed-price menus, whose composition is something of an art form. The prices are low, the flavors are sensational, and hints of Italian zest pop up frequently in such dishes as risotto with scampi. See p. 191.
- **La Fourchette** (Avignon, Provence; ☎ 04-90-85-20-93): Creative cookery

at modern prices is offered at this authentically French bistro in the center of town. Long known for its value and good food, the airy dining rooms here tempt you with platter after platter, everything from monkfish stew with *endive* to fresh sardines flavored with citrus. See p. 147.

- **Le Safari** (Nice, Eastern Riviera; ☎ 04-93-80-18-44): This ever-popular, ever-crowded brasserie overlooking the *cours Saleya* market soaks up every ray of Riviera sun. Dressed in jeans, waiters hurry back and forth, serving the habitués and visitors alike on the sprawling terrace. This place makes one of the best salad Niçoise concoctions in town, as well as a drop-dead spring lamb roasted in a wood-fired oven. See p. 319.

## 15 The Best Shopping Bets

- **Centre Sant-Vicens** (Perpignan, Languedoc-Roussillon; ☎ 04-68-50-02-18): This region of France is next door to Catalonia, whose capital is Barcelona. Catalan style, as long ago evoked by Antoni Gaudí, is modern and up-to-date here—at affordable prices. Textiles, pottery, and furnish-

ings in forceful geometric patterns are displayed at this showcase. See “Perpignan” in chapter 4.

- **Mistral-Les Indiens de Nîmes** (Avignon, Provence; ☎ 04-90-86-32-05): Provence has long been celebrated for its fabrics, and one of the best, most original, and affordable selections is



found here. Open since the early 1980s, this outlet went back into the attic to rediscover old Provençal fabrics and to duplicate them in a wide assortment. The fabric is sold by the meter and can be shaped into everything from clothing to tableware. See “Avignon” in chapter 5.

- **Les Olivades Factory Store** (St-Etienne-du-Grès, Provence; ☎ 04-90-49-19-19): About 12km (7½ miles) north of Arles on the road leading to Tarascon, this store features the region’s most fully stocked showroom of art objects and fabrics inspired by the traditions of Provence. You’ll find fabrics, dresses, shirts for men and women, table linen, and fabric by the yard. Part of the Olivades chain, this store has the widest selection and the best prices. See “Arles” in chapter 5.
- **Santons Fouque** (Aix-en-Provence, Provence; ☎ 04-42-26-33-38): Collectors from all over Europe and

North America purchase *santons* (figures of saints) in Provence. You’ll find the best ones here, cast in terra cotta, finished by hand, and decorated with an oil-based paint. The figures are from models made in the 1700s. See “Aix-en-Provence” in chapter 5.

- **Verreries de Biot** (Biot, Eastern Riviera; ☎ 04-93-65-03-00): Biot has long been known for its unique pottery, *verre rustique*. Since the 1940s, artisan glassmakers here have been creating this bubble-flecked glass in brilliant colors like cobalt and emerald. They’re collector’s items but sold at affordable prices on home turf. The Verreries de Biot is the oldest, most famous, and most frequently visited outlet. A half-dozen others are within a short distance of the town. If you arrive at this shop on any day except Sunday, you can actually see the glassmakers creating this unique product. See “Biot” in chapter 7.