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# Strategies for Seeing the Region





**Provence and the Riviera** are regions to experience rather than “see”; life moves more slowly in the south of France, and hasty sightseeing cuts against the grain of daily life. With so many compelling small towns, villages, and rural landscapes, you’ll be tempted to visit them all, but if you rush you’ll miss the essence of the place. Here are strategies to help you enrich your time and travels.

### Rule #1: Allow for down time

Don’t cram your days full of activities. Build in plenty of time to unwind; to stop and smell the lavender; to eat long, hearty lunches; to slowly savor the wine and admire the views. These humble experiences could well become the pinnacle of your trip if you don’t sully them by rushing. To make the most of your time, decide what you want to do most that day, then plan your other activities in the same area.

### Rule #2: Take distances into account

Provence and the Riviera are as easy to traverse as a small U.S. state. Under normal conditions, you can drive between many of the region’s most popular stops in less than an hour. In traffic, however, it’s another story. Certain destinations—particularly those away from the *autoroute* (highway)—can take much longer to reach during peak periods. If you’re visiting popular spots in summer, around school vacations, or on public holidays, tack at least 30 minutes onto estimated drive times (even longer on the Côte d’Azur). As a general rule, roads are well maintained and sign-posted, but carry a detailed road map. See p 201 for crucial driving tips in France.

### Rule #3: Time your visit right

If it’s your life-long dream to see lavender fields, don’t visit in spring; lavender blooms in July and August. Skip summer, however, if you want to experience the region at its most authentic—minus hoards of

tourists. Opt for March and April or September and October instead, when the weather is warm, but tourists are back at work. February can also be lovely on the Riviera, when Menton’s Lemon festival, Bormes-les-Mimosas’s mimosa festival, and Nice’s carnival brighten the streets. Work out in advance what you want to see and do, then choose the season accordingly. See p 196 for a calendar of events.

*A quayside coffee break in Marseille.*



**Rule #4: Decide whether to hotel-hop or stay in one place**

Some of the region's most popular stops are near one another. By choosing a base for several days and exploring the surrounding area on day trips, you'll save time checking in and out of rooms, packing and unpacking. Avignon, St-Rémy, Les Baux, Nîmes, and Arles are so close you'd do best to bed down in just one town, reserving your energy for hotel changes on the longer hauls. On the Côte d'Azur, Nice is a fine station from which to explore Monaco, Menton, and the coastal villages around Cagnes, St-Paul-de-Vence, and Biot.

**Rule #5: Plan trips around lunch**

If you're driving from town to town, it's best to arrive before lunch. Most restaurants serve from noon to 2 or 2:30pm sharp, and many shops close at noon for the midday meal. If you don't want to follow such a strict schedule, pack your own food and follow your heart's desire to a picnic spot under the Provençal sun.

**Rule #6: Plot your point of entry and means of transport there**

Provence has small airports in Marseille, Nîmes, and Nice, but none receive flights from the U.S. or Canada. If you must fly to the region, you will inevitably take off from Paris at either the Charles de Gaulle or Orly airports. Planes are a time-effective means of transport for Nice and the Riviera: Nice's airport is practically in the town center and receives daily flights from Paris and other European cities. The quickest and most cost-effective way to access Provence from Paris, however, is on France's legendary high-speed TGV trains. Avignon takes just 2 hours, Aix-en-Provence 2½, and Marseille a little under 3. You can rent cars at all the region's airports and train stations (see p 201 for a list of agencies). If you drive from Paris, the main *autoroutes* into the region are the A6, A7, and A8. From Paris, you should allow at least 6 hours to reach Avignon, 8 for Marseille, and up to 10 for Nice. ●

*A cyclist near the village of Suzette.*

