



In the heart of the department 'Var', between the river Verdon and the mountain chains of La Sainte Baume and La Sainte Victoire (famously painted by Paul Cezanne) lies a sunny oasis of coolness and tranquillity, La Provence Verte, which has remained, intact and authentic. The 37 villages forming the Provence Verte offer you the privilege of experiencing the typical Provençal way of life.

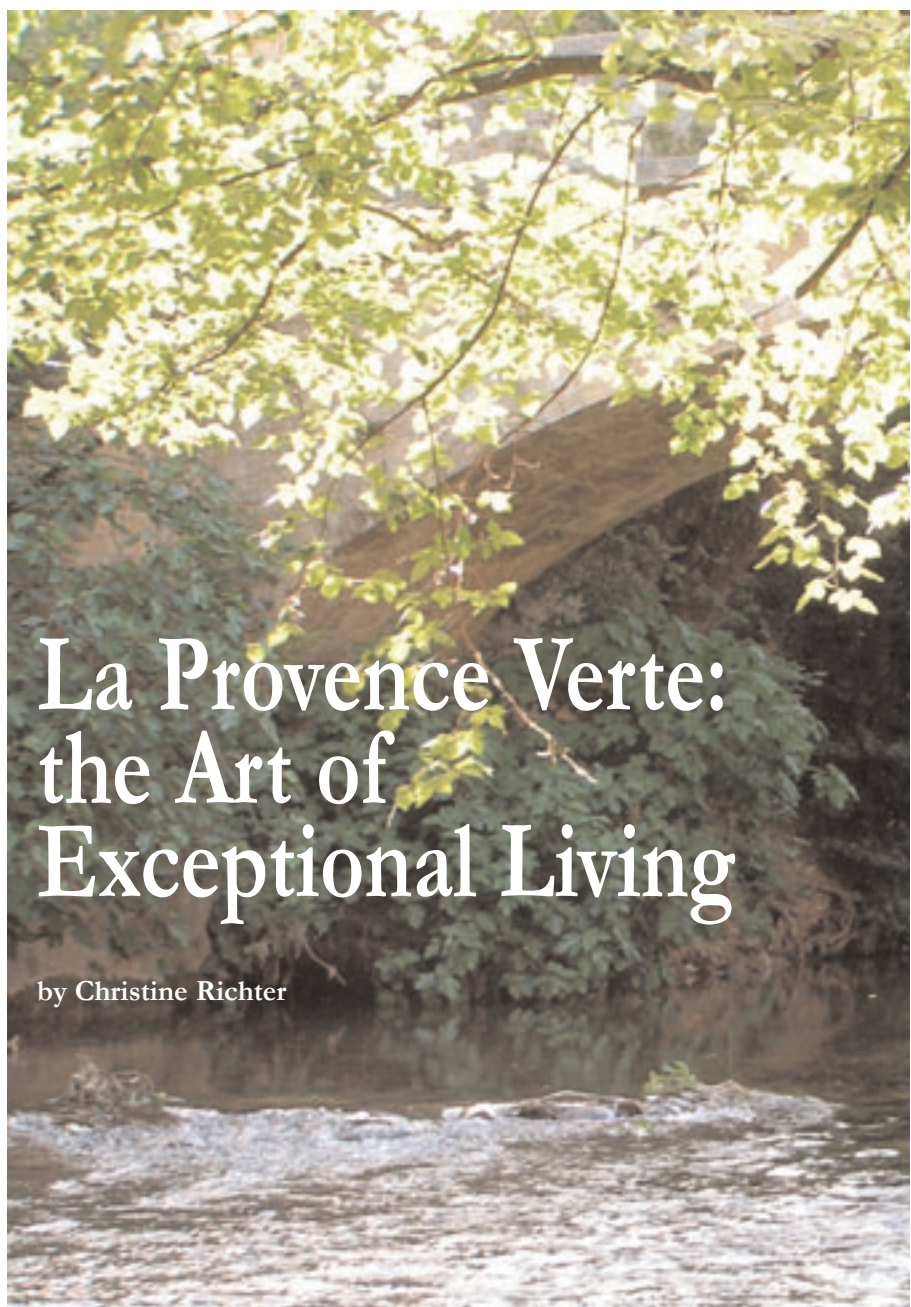
If you belong to those who would like to set out of the beaten track then Provence Verte will be your right destination. Here man and nature come together in some ecologically fragile areas that call for discretion and respect. You need only to be curious to follow the small roads and discover the splendour of this region and to taste the local products and specialities.

Unspoiled by the passage of time the beautiful Provençal landscape typified by olive trees, vineyards and lavender are a heaven of peace.

Nature

Water has fashioned the landscape of La Provence Verte through its springs and rivers. This combined with the mild Mediterranean climate gave birth to a hilly landscape blessed with a particularly rich fauna and flora. Here you can dream under oak, pine or olive trees rocked by the sap of the cicadas spending beautiful relaxed days.... Or

discover the natural sites: the Sainte Baume mountain chain with its ancient forest, the Saint Pilon cliff, the gorges of the Caramy at Mazaugues and Tourves, the volcanic cliff and cave dwelling in Cotignac, the Vallon Sourn with its rugged cliffs between Chateaufort and Correns, etc.. And experience outdoor sports such as walking, hiking, climbing, canoeing/kayaking, bicycle touring and horse riding. Two magnificent 18



La Provence Verte: the Art of Exceptional Living

by Christine Richter

Pourcieux: Eglise de l'Assomption



holes Golf courses are also available (Barbaroux Golf course, Brignoles and La Sainte Baume Golf Course, Nans Les Pins).

Culture

La Provence Verte is also a land of arts and history. It became the first area in the Provence Alpes Cote d'Azur region to receive the official recognition "Pays d'Art et d'Histoire" (country of arts and history) from the Ministry of Culture. This recognition marks the wish of the 37 villages to develop tourism based on cultural heritage, architecture, local history, ancient and contemporary art, music festivals and traditional events. Castles, abbeys, bastides, bell towers,





The latter houses the oldest clock of the region (1476).

The Provence Verte is also marked by the religious heritage, especially with the evidence of the presence of Mary Magdalene. Saint Maximin La Sainte Baume, originally a gallo-roman site, owes much of its fame to that part of history touched by the mystique and legend of Mary Magdalene. Her relics are preserved in The Basilica of Saint Maximin. It is the third tomb of Christianity. Construction of the Basilica started in 1295 and 250 years later it stood as it stands today an unfinished masterpiece, the largest Gothic building in the South of France. Its portal, belfry and rose window have never been completed. The Basilica contains also a world famous organ built in 1773 equipped with 4 keyboards and 2960 pipes. On the Northern side of the basilica lies the Royal Convent completed in the 15th century and inhabited by the Dominicans until 1957. Today the austere monk cells are comfortable hotel bedrooms and the Convent with its cloître serves as both a hotel-restaurant and a historical setting for many cultural and other events.

Not far from Saint Maximin, on the flanks of the mountain chain of Sainte Baume lies the grotto and the monastery of Mary Magdalene. Here she came to take refuge at the end of his life.

Other important religious sites of the Provence Verte are the sanctuaries Notre de Dame de Grace at Cotignac, built in 1519 to honour of the Virgin Mary and the royal abbey of La Celle, built in the 12th century, a true jewel of Provençal Romanesque Art. The Abbey houses today also a small four star hotel (10 rooms) with a well known restaurant (Alain Ducace).

Villages

fountains, vineyards and typical local products are available to you to be discovered.

Just as an example follow the road of the castles: the castle of Entrecasteaux (11/18th century) with its French garden designed by Le Notre; The present owner will open it up for you and be your guide. The Castle of Vins sur Caramy, restored by the owner since 1959, dates back to the Renaissance period. It offers today accommodation (5 guestrooms). In both castles concerts are organised during the season. Other castles of interest are the castle of Montfort sur Argens, Ollieres, Saint Martin de Pallieres and the ruins of the castle of Valbelle at Tourves.

Very specific to the Southern part of France are the bell towers ('campanile'), real works of arts. They distinguish from other bell towers by their open ironwork unit designed to support a public chiming clock or a church bell. This particularity would be due to the Mistral (strong wind). Famous are the bell towers in the village of Le Val, Correns, Tavernes and Saint Maximin la Sainte Baume.

Each of the 37 villages of La Provence Verte is worth visiting and has something specific to show you. Just open your eyes and stroll through their narrow streets or contemplate from a bistrot on the main square local life and atmosphere or just sit on one of the old public washing places ('lavoirs') - many of them have been nicely restored - in the shadow.

Here are some of the villages you should not miss: Barjols with its 33 fountains, nicknamed 'The Tivoli of Provence'; Brignoles with its medieval district, former city of the counts of Provence; Fox Amphoux, the old village perched on a hill; Varages, a pottery village. Potters practise here their art since 1695; Mazaugues and its ice-making museum where you can discover the history of ice-making, etc..and of course, all the others mentioned in the article.





Suggestion: Excursions outside of La Provence Verte two exceptional spots

Ile de Porquerolles

Porquerolles is the biggest of the three Golden Islands (îles d'Or) in the gulf of Hyeres: 7 km long and 3 km wide. It is also a Provençal village, built in 1820, with some small hotels, restaurants and shops.

Since 1971 the state has bought 4/5 of the island to protect it from unsightly housing or hotel development. The style and architecture of the existing houses blend harmoniously with the natural beauty of the site.

By following the footpath and cycling tracks (50 km) you can explore the island, admire the exceptional panoramas and enjoy near-tropical beaches with fine golden sand or even taste the wine which is cultivated on the island. In the interior of the island you find also olive tree and fruit tree (lemons, oranges and mandarins) plantations.

This island is very popular in summer, however the number of visitors is limited due to the islands location accessible only by ferry (20 minutes from La Tour Fondu/Hyeres). Cars are not allowed. The island has also a marina and several medieval fortresses such as the 14th century Fort Agathe

Bormes Les Mimosas

The old village (12th century) sitting on the flanks of the forested Maures mountains is one of the most florally decorated villages of France; famous for the blossom and festival of mimosas (January to March). Bormes les Mimosas is also the beginning of the tourist Road of the Mimosas (130 km).

It offers with the castle ruins and ramparts an exceptional panoramic view of the plain, Mediterranean Sea and the Iles d'Or (golden islands). Bormes les Mimosas constitutes certainly a stage of discovery impossible to circumvent for those in love with old stones and history. In addition to the charm of its tortuous lanes, its fountains, and well preserved architecture, you can also appreciate the richness of its flora (700 varieties of plants and flowers, 60 varieties of mimosas).

Wine

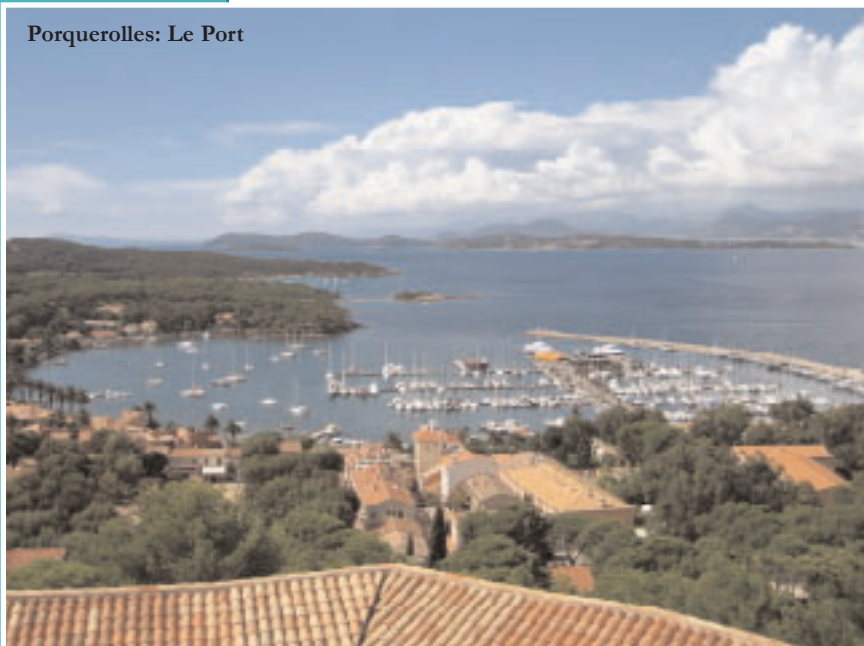
The Provence is the oldest wine-growing area of France and rosé the oldest of all wines. In La Provence Verte you will find two

AOC: AOC Cotes de Provence and AOC Coteaux Varois without forgetting the tempting 'Vins du pays' (local wines).

You have the choice to visit about 100 domains and caves, but definitely you should visit the vineyards of MIRAVAL and one of the village of Correns, the leading organic village in France, such as Aspras for example. Miraval is certainly one of the most beautiful historic domains of Provence. Miraval dates from pre-roman times and occupies a magical site in a wooden valley where water flows in abundance. Grapes (Grenache, Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah, Cinsault, Rolle) are harvested by hand as quality and excellence come before quantity. At Miraval you can find also the typical Provençal stone terraces which shape the landscape. They have been recently restored and 2000 olive trees were planted on them for the production of extra virgin olive oil.

Wines have to be tasted with moderation, but when it comes to describe their flavour, colour and taste words are not enough to

Porquerolles: Le Port



express your sensations. The wines with their colours and aromas sing the beauty of the Provence Verte.

Local Cuisine

Provençal cuisine is full of vibrant colours and unforgettable flavours. Just go to one of the weekly markets in the villages and admire the fresh vegetables, fruits and herbs.

Vegetables, garlic, herbs and olive oil are the four mainstays of the local cuisine which you will find in the Ratatouille (a vegetable plate made of tomatoes, eggplants, zucchinis, poivrons, garlic, onions, herbs and olive oil), soupe au pistou (vegetable soup with basil and garlic), anchovy paste, taponade (olive paste), fougasse (festive special flat bread), Brignolais rabbit, asparagus flan of Saint Maximin, etc....





There are a great variety of restaurants offering typical provençal, traditional or gastronomique cuisine such as Restaurant du Cours at Cotignac, Le Val Bohème at Le Val, La Cabro d'Or at Carces, Auberge du Parc at Correns, just to mention a few.

Accommodation

La Provence Verte has no hotels of international chains. Hotel capacity is rather limited with about 500 rooms of which the Hostellerie du Couvent Royal, Saint Maximin (66 rooms) and two small 4star small hotels, Hostellerie de l'Abbaye la Celle, la Celle et Domaine du Chateaneuf, Nans les Pins (golf course) This lack, however, is more than compensated with an excellent offer of home stays, bed & breakfast and rental holiday apartments.

Book a room for example at La Courtesie (Saint Maximin La Sainte Baume) or at Fleur du Cap (Bras). Philippe and Marie Ange will welcome you in their splendid villa, La Courtesie. In the evening Philippe will delight you with local dishes whilst Marie Ange will spoil you with her delicious and mouth-watering desserts.

Fleur du Cap is a private guesthouse in an authentic Provençal 'Bastide' embedded into a magnificent nature park of old pine and oak woods, vineyards, olive and lavender fields. Here you can either rent a room as 'B+B' or a self-catering apartment with own kitchenette, allowing you to prepare all your meals independently.



photo R. Callier



Ideal Location

La Provence Verte is ideally located. From here you can reach by car within a short time Aix en Provence, Avignon, the Camargue, the Verdon Canyon (largest Canyon in Europe and second biggest in the world after the Grand Canyon, USA), the Southern Alps, the Cote d'Azur with its famous sea resorts, Cannes, Nice, Monaco, extraordinary rocky bays 'Calanques' of Cassis etc...

