

## 5. THE LUBERON

Just a short distance from Avignon and Aix-en-Provence by car, the towns of the **Luberon** region are my favorites. From canals and antique shops in **L'Isle-sur-la-Sorgue** to fine dining in **Lourmarin** to truly unspoiled villages like **Cucuron**, this area offers the perfect vacation. This is the heart of the market area; nearly every town has a great one, and these otherwise quiet towns come to life on market day.



## A WONDERFUL WEEK IN THE LUBERON

I love this part of France. Linger in **L'Isle-sur-la-Sorgue**, the Venice of Provence; admire the majestic **Fontaine-de-Vaucluse**, the Niagara Falls of Provence; walk around the picturesque village of **Gordes**; and visit other beautiful small towns in the region, with their lavender fields, lovely markets, and wonderful hotels, restaurants and cafés.

**RECOMMENDED PLAN:** Stay in **Lourmarin** at Les Olivettes or in or near **L'Isle-sur-la-Sorgue**. Both of these towns are within easy driving distance of all the towns in this week-long plan. Both towns also offer plenty of great places to dine.

### L'Isle-sur-la-Sorgue

Today, we'll visit **L'Isle-sur-la-Sorgue**. It's 16 miles (26 km) east of Avignon/25 miles (40 km) southeast of Orange.

The name means "Island on the Sorgue River," and is often referred to as the "Venice of Provence." I love this valley town. You'll find pedestrian bridges with flower boxes crossing graceful canals. Nine moss-covered waterwheels (that once powered the town's paper, silk and wool mills) remain along the canals.

Only Paris is said to have more antique and secondhand shops in France. There are more than 300 shops in this little town. Most are open daily. There's

### Outdoor Market

This otherwise quiet town is filled with crowds on Sunday. Stands loaded with local produce, crafts and antiques fill the streets along with street performers. Browse the market and then watch others do the same at one of the many cafés. There's a more sedate market on Thursdays. *Info:* From the place Gambetta (the main entrance to the town) up avenue des 4 Otages.

### Don't Miss ...

- the markets and shops of **L'Isle-sur-la-Sorgue**
- **Fontaine-de-Vaucluse**, the "Niagara Falls of Provence"
  - **Gordes** and **Rousillon**
- **Saignon**, out of the way but worth it
- **Lourmarin**, a gastronome's delight

a huge antique fair at Easter. Try **Galerie aux Trouvailles**. This indoor antique center has 20 shops selling everything from furniture to household goods. *Info:* 12 la Petit Marine. Tel. 04/90.21.14.31. Closed Tue and Wed.

You're going to need a break after looking at all those antiques. Head to **Le Caveau de la Tour de l'Isle**, a wine bar

and store on the cobblestone, pedestrian-only street leading to the cathedral. You can try wines by the glass with local cheese and sausage. *Info:* 12 rue de la République. Tel. 04/90.20.70.25. Closed Sun and Mon. Inexpensive.

In the center of the Old Town, you'll find the **Collégiale Notre-Dame-des-Anges**, a 17<sup>th</sup>-century church. Its Baroque interior is filled with gilded statues, frescoes and *faux* marble. Parts of the church date back to the 12<sup>th</sup> century. *Info:* Center of Old Town. Open daily. Admission: Free.

Next to the Collégiale Notre-Dame-des-Anges on the place de la Liberté is the picturesque **Café de France**, another good place for a break.

If you can, stay for dinner in this lovely city. It has many fine places to dine. Here are three choices, depending on how much you want to spend.

You can sip local wines while ducks float by and colored lights twinkle above you at **Lou Nego Chin**. Just the type of dining experience you came to Provence for. *Info:* 12 quai Jean Jaurès. Tel. 04/90.20.88.03. Closed Wed. Closed Tue Oct-Apr. Inexpensive-Moderate.

The popular **Le Jardin du Quai** serves innovative dishes. In good weather, you can dine in its large and lovely garden under

chestnut trees. *Info:* 91 avenue Julien Guigue (opposite the station). Tel. 04/90.20.14.98. Closed Tue and Wed. Expensive.

Splurge on award-winning cuisine in a lovely setting on a narrow street near the cathedral at **La Prévôte**. *Info:* 4 bis rue Jean-Jacques-Rousseau. Tel. 04/90.38.57.29. Closed Tue and Wed and mid-Feb to mid-Mar. Expensive.

### Fontaine-de-Vaucluse

While nearby L'Isle-sur-la-Sorgue has been called the "Venice of Provence," **Fontaine-de-Vaucluse** has been called the "Niagara Falls of Provence." It's 5 miles (8 km) east of L'Isle-sur-la-Sorgue/20 miles (32 km) east of Avignon. Parking €3 on both sides of town.

Don't be fooled, though, as at times of the year the *fontaine*, in a cave at the end of a riverside walk, is not much to look at. Europe's most powerful spring gushes 55 million gallons of water each day from the base of 750-foot-high cliffs. The source?



No one really knows. Millions visit this sight, and the little village of the same name is loaded with souvenir shops and cafés. You'll pass these on your way to the *fontaine* after you pay to park your car. Visit early or late in the day to avoid the crowds. In the evening, the illuminated *château* sparkles above the town.

While here, there are plenty of cafés and restaurants to take a break. There are also several good special-interest museums. The **Speleology Museum** (Écomusée du Gouffre) is a small underground museum devoted to caves, caving, rocks and minerals (45-minute guided tours). *Info:* chemin de la Fontaine (the riverside walk to the fountain). Tel. 04/90.20.34.13. Closed Dec and Jan. Admission: €4.

The **Muséum d'Histoire 1939-1945** is a modern museum devoted to the literature, art and history of World War II, especially the

Nazi occupation of France. *Info:* chemin de la Fontaine. Tel. 04/90.20.24.00. Closed Dec 25-May 1. Admission: €4.

The small **Musée Pétrarque** honors Petrarch, an Italian Renaissance poet who moved here after being rejected by a married woman. *Info:* Rive Gauche de la Sorgue (village center). Tel. 04/90.20.37.20. Closed Tue. Admission: €4.

**Vallis-Clausa** is a working paper mill where artisans create paper as done in the 15<sup>th</sup>-century. *Info:* chemin de la Fontaine. Tel. 04/90.20.34.14. Open daily. Admission: Free.

Guided **canoe trips** depart from Fontaine-de-Vaucluse on two-hour, five-mile trips down the Sorgue River. The trip ends in nearby L'Isle-sur-la-Sorgue and a shuttle brings you back. There are several tour companies offering these trips. One is Kayaks Verts, Tel. 04/90.20.35.44, €20.

### **Gordes & The Village des Bories**

Perched above the Coulon Valley, the small picturesque village of **Gordes** has narrow alleys between stone homes that appear to be stacked on top of each other. It's 10 miles (16 km) southeast of Fontaine-de-Vaucluse/ 22 miles (36 km) east of Avignon. Gordes is touristy and trendy, with boutiques and galleries.

In the center of town, you'll find the fortified Renaissance **Château des Gordes**. You can view its interior and a contemporary art collection. *Info:* Center of town. Tel. 04/90.72.02.75. Closed Tue. Admission: €5.



Also in the center of town is the **Eglise St-Fermin**. Stop in for a quick view of the church's blue floral interior and *faux* marble pulpit. *Info:* Center of town. Open daily. Admission: Free.

If you're looking for a place to dine in Gordes, try **Comptoir du Victuailler**. This small 1930s-style bistro serves wonderful roast meats (especially lamb). *Info:* place du Château (across from the château). Tel. 04/90.72.01.31. Closed Tue (dinner) and Wed in winter. Closed mid-Nov to mid-Dec. Moderate.

Only two miles away from Gordes is a popular tourist destination, the **Village des Bories**. *Bories* are beehive-shaped stone huts built by peasants (without mortar) who lived in them while tending their flocks. There are said to be 6,000 in Provence. It's believed that Neolithic man lived in huts like these, and that they were copied over the years. This cluster of *bories* is part of a village showcasing this peasant community, which was inhabited between 1600 and 1800. Note that if you're unable to park in the lot closest to the village, the walk from route D2 is 1.2 miles (2 km). *Info:* 2 miles (4 km) southwest of Gordes off route D2 toward Coustellet. Tel. 04/90.72.03.48. Open daily 9am until sunset. Admission: €6.

Only two miles from Gordes is a must-see sight and worth the drive.

If you're visiting in late June, July or August, the lavender fields surrounding the austere 12<sup>th</sup>-century abbey **Abbaye Notre-Dame de Sénanque** are in splendid bloom. Even if you don't visit the abbey, don't miss this perfect photo opportunity. You can visit



### Colorful Lavender

It's everywhere and it's beautiful. During **lavender season** (late June through August), there's nothing more breathtaking than lavender fields and yellow fields of sunflowers. Lavender is harvested beginning in July and distilled for perfume and soap. Some of the most spectacular lavender fields are found between Buoux and Forcalquier. For those interested in lavender, you can visit the **Musée de la Lavande** on route D2 in Cabrières outside of Gordes.

the cloisters, church, refectory and dormitory. The only heated room was the calefactory, or sitting room, which allowed the monks to read and write without freezing. There are permanent exhibits on the history of the Cistercians and the construction of the abbey, and there are still monks who make this their home. *Info:* 2 miles (4 km) north of Gordes on route D177. Tel. 04/90.72.05.72. Open Mar-Oct Mon-Sat 10am-noon and 2pm-6pm, Sun 2pm-6pm; Nov-Feb 2pm-5pm. Admission: €6.

### Rousillon

Today, we'll visit colorful **Rousillon** and experience a taste of old Provence in

**Oppède-le-Vieux**. Rousillon is 6 miles (10 km) east of Gordes/28 miles (45 km) east of Avignon.

Legend has it that a local lord had his wife's lover killed and the wife threw herself off a cliff, staining the rocks with her blood. In reality, two centuries of ochre mining have left this perched village surrounded by red quarries and cliffs. From deep red to light yellow, the colors of this town alone are worth a visit. Although it can be quite crowded in high tourist season, you can still find peaceful, beautiful squares and take in the surrounding countryside.



While here, a good choice for both indoor and outdoor dining is the friendly **Bistro de Rousillon**, serving hearty Provençal fare. Moderate. *Info:* place de la Marine. Tel. 04/90.05.74.45. Closed Jan and mid-Nov to mid-Dec.

Just three miles (five km) southeast of Rousillon on route D108 is the **Pont Julien**. This three-arched bridge was built by the Romans over 2000 years ago without the use of mortar. It crosses the Calavon River.

While Roussillon is usually crowded with tourists, the nearby town of **Oppède-le-Vieux** will give you a taste of Old Provence. It's 9 miles (14 km) south of Gordes/16 miles (26 km) southeast of Avignon.

This hilltop village (don't confuse it with the lower modern town of Oppède), surrounded by thick forests, was deserted in 1900. The ruins of a medieval *château* loom above. In fact, much of the town itself is still in ruins, although some artists and writers have moved in and beautifully restored homes. You must park at the base of the hill (€2) and walk through a tiered garden filled with local plants labeled with their Latin, French and English names. Cross through the old city gate and walk up the steep alleys to visit the 13<sup>th</sup>-century church **Notre-Dame d'Alydon**, with its gargoyles and hexagon-shaped bell tower. Truly a taste of old Provence.



Outside of the old city gate are two places to stop for a drink or a bite. **Le Petit Café** and **L'Echaugnette** both have decent fare at reasonable prices.

### **Ménerbes & The Land of A Year in Provence**

Peter Mayle wrote *A Year in Provence* about **Ménerbes** and the towns surrounding it. Ménerbes is 3 miles (5 km) east of Oppède-le-Vieux/19 miles (31 km) southeast of Avignon.

This town with its impressive fortifications and crowned by the turreted *château* was once a Protestant stronghold during the 16<sup>th</sup>-century War of the Religions. You'll find Renaissance homes and

terrific views of the countryside. Visit the attractive **Place de l'Horloge** (Clock Square), in the shadow of City Hall.

Although Picasso once owned a home in Ménerbes, it's another home that gets all the attention. Peter Mayle wrote the enormously successful *A Year in Provence* about his home and the towns surrounding it. Tour buses still pass by and gawk. He no longer lives here and it's hard to feel sorry for the current owners as they must have known what they were getting themselves into! *Info*: 1 mile (2 km) from Ménerbes on route D3 to Bonnieux (second house from the right after the soccer field). No admission.

Between Oppède-le-Vieux and Ménerbes is the **Musée du Tire-Bouchon** (Corkscrew Museum). Housed in a mansion, this museum doesn't just feature thousands of corkscrews. It also has wine tastings. *Info*: On route D109 between Oppède-le-Vieux and Ménerbes. Tel. 04/90.72.41.58. Closed Sun. Admission: €4.

Just four miles (six km) east of Ménerbes is **Lacoste**. This town with its fortified medieval gateways is dominated by the *château* that was once owned by the Marquis de Sade who hosted his infamous orgies here. The castle is currently being restored by designer Pierre Cardin. The town comes to life in July and August when the **Festival Lacoste**, with musical and theatrical events, takes place.

When visiting this area, don't miss the hilltop village of **Bonnieux**. It's 3 miles (5km) east of Lacoste/7 miles (11 km) southeast of Rousillon/28 miles (46 km) northwest of Aix-en-Provence.



Layers of homes topped with a 12<sup>th</sup>-century church (the simply named **Vieille Eglise** or "Old Church") make Bonnieux one of the most impressive hilltop villages. Its steep streets are bordered by restored homes. Climb the 86 steps from the place de la Liberté

and rue de la Mairie up to the church to take in the great view of the surrounding countryside.

While here, I recommend **Le Fournil** where you can dine outdoors (*see Best Sleeps & Eats chapter for details*).

There's nothing like French bread. The **Musée de la Boulangerie**, in a 17<sup>th</sup>-century house, features a century-old bread oven and bread shop. Exhibits show all phases of breadmaking. *Info*: 12 rue de la République. Tel. 04/90.75.88.34. Closed Tue and Oct-Mar. Admission: €4.

Near Bonnieux is an excellent setting for dinner. Provençal specialties are served at **Auberge de l'Aiguebrun** or, if you want to visit one of Peter Mayle's favorites in *A Year in Provence*, head to the small town of **Buoux**, five miles (nine km) south of Apt. This peaceful rural town is surrounded by lavender fields and crowned by the ruins of the Buoux Fort. It's a destination for the popular **Auberge de la Loube** restaurant, where *agneau rôti* (roast lamb) is the specialty (*see Best Sleeps & Eats chapter for details*).

### **Apt & Saignon**

Today we'll visit the market town of **Apt** and the unspoiled village of **Saignon**. Apt is 32 miles (52 km) northwest of Aix-en-Provence/32 miles (52 km) west of Avignon.

Apt's claim to fame, despite its unattractive industrial outskirts, is that it's the world capital of candied fruit (*fruits-confits*). You'll find shops selling it everywhere. There's a huge market on Saturday mornings at **place de la Bouquerie**. The modern section is unappealing, but the **Old Town** (Vieille Ville) with its narrow streets is worth a visit. The **Cathédrale St-Anne** (closed Sunday afternoons) in the Old Town has a large collection of relics (guided tours only), and the cathedral's crypt is said to hold the remains of St. Anne, the mother of the Virgin Mary.

Near the ancient cathedral are three museums: **Maison du Parc** (a geology museum), **Musée de la Paléontologie** (a dinosaur museum), and **Musée de l'Aventure Industrielle** (a museum

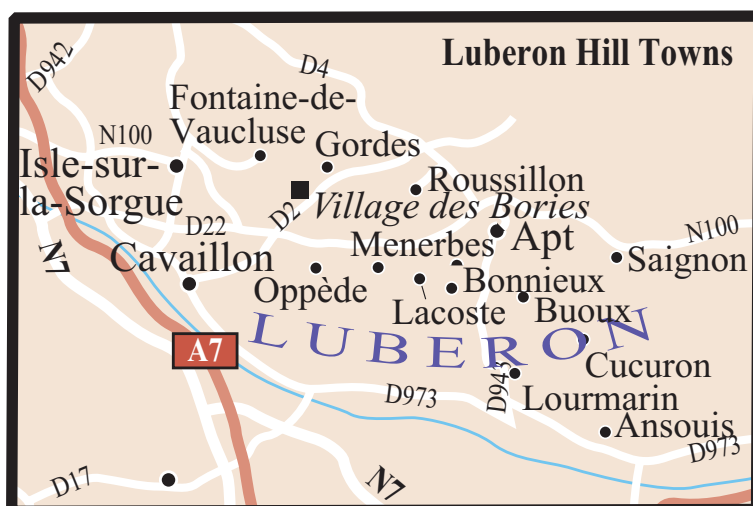
dedicated to the local candied-fruit, ochre-extraction and earthenware industries). The town also has an **Archeology Museum** (Musée Archéologique) at place Carnot (*Info*: Tel. 04/90.04.76.65. Closed Tue. Admission: €3) with Roman objects from the surrounding area.

Nearby is the truly unspoiled hill town of **Saignon**. It's two miles (three km) southeast of Apt. Out of the way, but certainly worth



the trip! This lovely, quiet, and unspoiled town high on a hill has picturesque shady squares, time-worn fountains and ruins of ancient baths. The wood-carved doors of the Roman church **Eglise Notre-Dame de Pitié** depict Christ and Mary. The cemetery behind the church provides its permanent "residents" with a panoramic view of the countryside.

Regional specialties are served at **Auberge du Presbytère** in the center of town, surrounded by vine-covered stone buildings near the rustic fountain (see *Best Sleeps & Eats* chapter for details).



**Lourmarin**

Hungry? Head to **Lourmarin**, the gastronomic capital of Provence. It's six miles (ten km) south of Bonnieux.

Lourmarin's winding narrow streets are lined with stone houses painted in shades of ochre and beige. It has a Renaissance chapel and both Catholic and Protestant churches. The village lies at the foot of the Luberon Mountain range which is covered with pine and oak trees. Surrounding the village are olive groves and vineyards. Although French vacationers discovered this little village years ago, it's now popular with foreign tourists. Its renovated *château* is the site of frequent concerts and exhibits. Visitors have quite a few cafés and restaurants to choose from, and it's become the gastronomic capital of the area. It's a lovely town with much to offer, and a great base for touring some of the prettiest towns of Provence.



Two of my favorite dining choices – of the many this town has to offer – are **Restaurant Michel Ange** on place de la Fontaine and **Auberge La Fenière** on the outskirts of town, whose chef has been called the “Queen of Provençal cooking” (see *Best Sleeps & Eats* chapter for details).

When in town, head to **La Cave à Lourmarin**. The interesting wines of the Côtes du Luberon, along with regional products, are available at incredibly discounted prices at this shop in the center of town. Friendly and helpful staff and generous wine tastings. *Info:* Montée du Galinier. Tel. 04/90.68.02.18. Open daily.

There are two towns nearby that are worth the short drives. **Cucuron** is only four miles (seven km) east of Lourmarin. Tourism

### Most Beautiful Villages

There are 141 villages throughout France designated as **Plus Beaux Villages** (Most Beautiful Villages). In order to receive this designation, the village must have a population under 2,000 and have at least two sites or buildings designated as “protected” by the government. The villages featured in this book are:

Moustiers-Ste-Marie,  
Gourdon, Les Baux-de-Provence, Ansouis, Gordes,  
Lourmarin, Ménerbes,  
Roussillon, Séguret, and  
Gassin.

has yet to invade this scenic small town. Parts of the ancient walls survive. A fortified gate and bell tower on place de l’Horloge is the entry for the ruins above the town. Take a break with locals at cafés along the large stone pool (**Bassin de l’Etang**) dating back to the 15<sup>th</sup> century. There’s a large market here on Tuesday mornings. The church **Eglise Notre-Dame-de-Beaulieu** has Gothic chapels and a Baroque altarpiece. Near the church is an ancient olive press, **Moulin à Huile Dauphin**, with a shop selling local specialties.

**Ansouis** is only eight miles (ten km) southeast of Lourmarin; the town lies at the foot of its medieval castle. The village houses are spread over the southern slope to shelter them from the Mistral (the brutal winds that touch this area at certain times of the year). There’s a 16<sup>th</sup>-century tower crowned with a wrought-iron bell tower, and the castle with its fortified walls and watchtower has been restored (guided visits only in the afternoons). Wooded groves, gardens and terraces surround the castle. You can pop into the church **Eglise St-Martin**. Originally a 12<sup>th</sup>-century fortress and former law court, this small church contains 17<sup>th</sup>- and 18<sup>th</sup>-century statues and altar pieces. At the entry to the castle, you can stop into the information center and purchase an inexpensive bottle of local wine.

Gardeners must visit **La Ferme de Gerbaud**, a 62-acre farm on the slopes of the Luberon mountain range offering 90-minute guided tours in English and French. You’ll see aromatic herbs and regional plants. The shop sells fragrances, dyes, olive oils and

herbs. *Info:* 2 miles (3 km) outside of Lourmarin (chemin d'Aguye to chemin de Gerbaud). Tours everyday at 5pm Apr-Oct and 3:30pm on Sat and Sun Nov-Mar.

