



Hill Towns of the Luberon

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Why Go?

Named after the mountain range running east–west between Cavaillon and Manosque, the Luberon is a Provençal patchwork of hilltop villages, vineyards, ancient abbeys and kilometre after kilometre of fragrant lavender fields. It's a rural, traditional region that still makes time for the good things in life – particularly fine food and even finer wine. Nearly every village hosts its own weekly market, packed with stalls selling local specialities, especially olive oil, honey and lavender.

Covering some 600 sq km, the Luberon massif itself is divided into three areas: the craggy Petit Luberon in the west, the higher Grand Luberon mountains and the smaller hills of the Luberon Oriental in the east. They're all worth exploring, but whatever you do, don't rush – part of the fun of exploring here is getting lost on the back lanes, stopping for lunch at a quiet village cafe, and taking as much time as you possibly can to soak up the scenery.

Driving Distances (km)

Bonnieux	10				
Cavaillon	35	25			
Gordes	21	19	17		
Lacoste	15	5	21	23	
Roussillon	13	10	28	9	14
	Apt	Bonnieux	Cavaillon	Gordes	Lacoste

VAUCLUSE MOUNTAINS

Some of Provence's quintessential sights – impossibly pretty villages, beehive-shaped *bories* (primitive dry-limestone dwellings), lavender fields and a stunning Cistercian abbey – lie just a few kilometres apart on the rugged northern side of the Luberon.

Make reservations as far ahead as possible for lunch and dinner, lest you go hungry. Every table fills in high season.

Getting Around

The Luberon, an hour from Avignon, is just 60km in length. Having a car makes travel much easier, as bus services are limited, but parking in some small villages can be a nightmare in summer.

The D900 bisects the valley from east to west. Secondary roads are slow and winding; watch out for roadside gullies.

BICYCLE

Don't be put off by the hills – the Luberon is a fantastic destination for cyclists. Several bike routes criss-cross the countryside, including Les Ocre à Vélo, a 51km route that takes in the ochre villages of Apt, Gargas, Rustrel, Roussillon and Villars, and the **Véloroute du Calavon** (www.af3v.org/-Fiche-VVV-.html?voie=107), a purpose-built bike path that follows the route of a disused railway line for 28km between Beaumettes in the west (near Coustellet), via Apt, to La Paraire in the west (near St-Martin-de-Castillon). Plans are underway to extend the trail all the way from Cavaillon to the foothills of the Alps, but it'll be a while before it's completed.

For longer trips, **Le Luberon à Vélo** (www.leluberonavelo.com; 203 rue Oscar Roulet, Robion) is a 236km itinerary that takes in pretty much the whole Luberon. Tourist offices stock detailed route leaflets and can provide info on rental, luggage transport, accommodation and so on.

Several companies offer e-bikes, which incorporate an electric motor. They're not scooters – you still have to pedal – but the motor helps on the ascents.

Luberon Biking (www.luberon-biking.fr; Velleron; per day from €22, per week €120) Delivers bikes straight to your door throughout the Luberon area, and also runs guided bike tours.

Luberon Cycles (www.luberon-cycles.com; 86 quai Général-Leclerc; per half-day/day from €12/16; ☉9am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Sat) Bike hire and general cycling supplies and services in Apt.

Sun-e-Bike (www.sun-e-bike.com; Bonnieux 04 90 74 09 96, St-Rémy-de-Provence 04 32 62 08 39; www.location-velo-provence.com; per day €36) Rents electric bikes. The rental offices are in

Bonnieux and St-Rémy-de-Provence, but you can recharge your battery at various other locations around the Luberon valley.

Bachelas Cycles (www.bachelas-cycles.com; 5 blvd de la République; per day/week from €19/€81; ☉9am-12.30pm & 2-7pm Mon-Wed, Fri & Sat) Bike hire (stand-ard and e-bike) in Forcalquier and Manosque (www.bachelas-cycles.com; 24 bd de la Plaine; ☉8.30am-12.30pm & 2-8pm Mon-Sat).

BUS

Most villages in the Luberon have a limited bus service that revolves around school term times. The main hub is Apt, which has buses to local villages, and a regular bus link to Cavaillon and Avignon. The **Trans Vaucluse** (www.vaucluse.fr) website has downloadable timetables.

The fare to all destinations is calculated by how far you travel; local destinations cost €1.50, further destinations a flat-rate €2.

TRAIN

The nearest train station is on the western side of the valley in Cavaillon, which is served by regular regional trains from Avignon. From Cavaillon, several buses a day run east to Apt.

Gordes & Around

Like a giant wedding cake rising over the Rivers Sorgue and Calavon, the tiered village of Gordes juts spectacularly out of the white-rock face of the Vaucluse plateau. Gordes is high on many tourists' must-see lists (notably celebrity Parisians): summer brings a cavalcade of buses, and car parks (€3) are choked. Arrive early or late, or expect to be crammed onto narrow footpaths, dodging tourists and buses. Come sunset, the village glows gold – an eye-popping sight.

Sights & Activities

★ Abbaye Notre-Dame de Sénanque

CHURCH

(www.abbayedesenanque.com; adult/child €7/3; ☉9.45-11am Mon-Sat, tours by reservation) Situated 4km northwest of Gordes off the D177, this supremely peaceful spot provides one of the classic postcard images of this part of Provence: a graceful Cistercian abbey surrounded by swathes of purple lavender. The best displays are usually in July and August, but you certainly won't be on your own when you visit.

Founded in 1148, the abbey is still home to a small monastic community, so it's only possible to visit the cloistered interior by