

ESCAPE



Gordes is picturesque but crowded and expensive.

IN THE PURPLE PATCH

A SOUTH AUSTRALIAN AUTHOR FINDS INSPIRATION AMONG THE LAVENDER FIELDS IN THE SOUTH OF FRANCE

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WE had come to see the famous lavender of Provence. There's only a three-week window in the year if you want to see it in its glorious purple, and that's in the last three weeks of July. Any earlier and it's not in full bloom; any later and you risk missing it because it's harvested so ruthlessly fast. And so we descended with the rest of the world's travellers, chasing the same dream as artists like Cezanne and Van Gogh, into the Luberon mountain region in France's far south where the alpine areas yielded the original, lavender "fin" or augustiflora, prized by perfumers all over the globe.

We chose a tiny, off-the-tourist-track village called Saignon (Sen-yon) as our base and we were thrilled we did; it's like a tiny fortress that clings precariously to its implacable rock towering high above Apt, a lively historic town where we did our market shopping and which is world renowned for its crystallised fruit.

It was weather only for mad dogs and Englishmen, with searing hot, dry days, so you need to be resilient if you want to see the lavender and be prepared to brave those hot afternoons especially when the locals close up their houses and keep them dark and cool.

However, each evening at dusk, when the light was at its softest and most seductive, dissolving the already breathtaking scenery into one huge impressionist painting, I'd take a long, looping and, at times, challenging walk around the village. There are lots of steep, hidden alleyways and they will lead you into open country, past the patchwork of cherry orchards, olive groves, vineyards and the magnificent lavender fields. Many times I just had to stop and stare; photographs can't do it justice. You simply have to seize the moment and feast on its prettiness, inhaling the gentle waft of thyme and lavender that is carried on the soft evening breeze and sharing your private joy with the low hum of busy bees pollinating the lavender.

I was constantly reminded of the Adelaide Hills during my stay. With our Mediterranean climate and our own valleys a patchwork of orchards, market gardens and vineyards, I reckon all it would take is a few lavender fields in the mix and some cypresses and it would morph into Little Provence!

Our hosts, Alain and Colette Blanc, were not fluent in English but their generous hospitality and sweetness crosses all language barriers. We were paying 55 euros daily at Maison de la Place for a fantastic room in their home overlooking the village square; it was cleaned and tidied daily with fresh towels and we were treated to a morning meal fit for kings. I have never had so much food presented to me as a continental breakfast, from almond tarts to the locally picked cherries, fine coffee and flaky croissants. There is no airconditioning, be warned, but you learn to use the evening breeze.

This is a living, breathing village of real locals, many



Lavender about to burst into flower.

FAST FACTS

GETTING THERE

One option is to fly to Paris with Emirates, with a stop in Dubai. From Paris take a train to Avignon and pick up a lease car.

ACCOMMODATION

For hotels, bed and breakfasts, house rentals and camping see ot-apt.fr

GETTING AROUND

The best option is to lease a car. Citroen, Peugeot and Renault all have leasing options from \$33 a day. globalcars.com.au

SEEING THERE

Perfume factories, villages, lavender fields.

of whom have lived in the area all their lives, and which dates back to pre-Roman times. The fountain is the pulse of the village and there we sat very early each morning with a cup of fresh coffee and watched life unfold ... babies had their toes dipped into it, children ran around it, tourists – mainly cyclists – cooled themselves from it, walkers filled their bottles from the spouts, waiters filled their carafes for the local cafes, horses watered at it, even a donkey called Caesar quenched his thirst, and a bride in all her finery skipped past, posing quickly for a photo.

Nowhere we visited was more than a 90-minute drive away and around every corner is a picture-postcard scene. Steep villages spill down the hillsides, giving you a sometimes hair-raising car journey up their narrow roads but always rewarding you with a cool drink at a café at the top and a magical vista. It's very easy to lose hours just lingering over a carafe of the local chilled rosé. But do visit Lacoste – notorious for being place where the Marquis de Sade was exiled – the very attractive and steep Bonnieux; Rousillon and Rustrel with their amazing ochre quarries; and picturesque Gordes – crowded and expensive but also fun and from where you can visit the impressive Senanque Abbey.

Sault (pronounced So), though, was our favourite, being much quieter and where you'll see the true wild lavender that set the French perfume industry alight. Lourmarin offered good shopping and cafes; a visit to Coustellet is necessary only for its lavender museum, and it's worth going on to L'Isle sur la Sorgue, a bigger town halfway to Avignon that is picturesque and lively, with the world's best ice cream parlour called Isabella.

A walk around Fontaine de Vaucluse – to visit the museum of the French Resistance and particularly the source of the River Sorgue – is thoroughly enjoyable because of its coolness in the madness of summer. We spent a day getting to and from the wine region of Chateauneuf-du-Pape – the Pope's new castle – to sample the famous red wine (the clergy certainly knew how to live well), closing in on the Cote d'Azur but never fully submitting to all of its temptations. We avoided Avignon because it was festival time and it becomes the in-place to be in France but is madly crowded.

Most of the villages don't serve hot food during the summer and aren't open during the winter because they're often snowed in. But the salad-style offerings are colourful, fresh and inexpensive at about 12 euros. The boulangeries will tempt you with any number of delicacies, but the specialties of the region include the famous nougat of the south, almond/cherry tarts, macarons, exquisite cordials in bouquets like violet, and jumbo meringues with flavours such as lavender. I think I ate my own bodyweight in sweet foods.

I'd recommend a few days in Paris, especially with a daily fix at Pierre Hermé's chocolate salon. You'll find it's a near perfect three weeks away when much of Australia is shivering. It was certainly perfect for me because France is the backdrop for my next historical saga, and Provence is where my story begins, at dusk on a perfect summer evening, and on whose gentle breeze rides a waft of lavender and thyme. ■

*Fiona McIntosh's current book, *Fields of Gold*, is out now. Penguin, \$32.95.*



Caesar the donkey drinks at the fountain in Saignon.