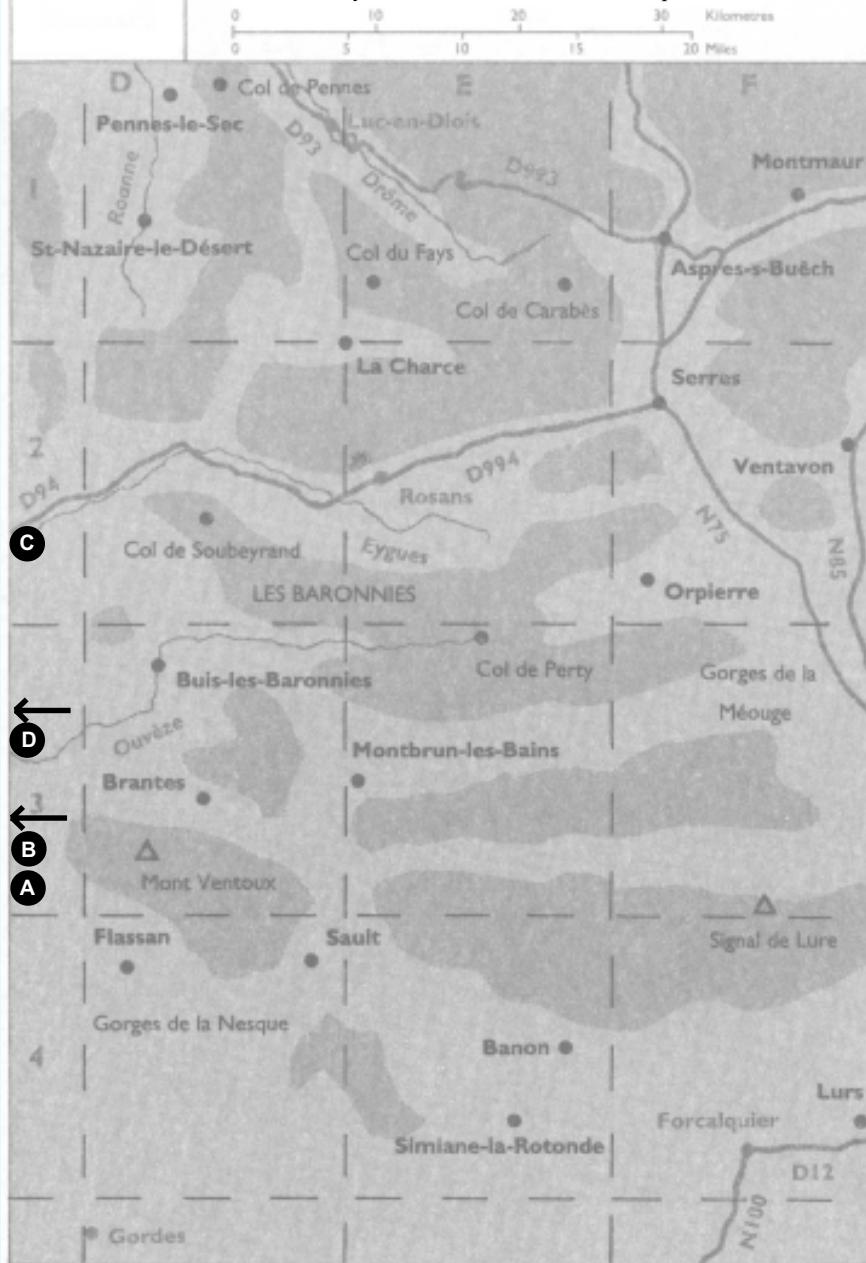


37

Ventoux & Baronnies: lime blossom and Hannibal.
Fifi Moulin. Weavers' nests. Maniacal *mistral*. Olives and
a white hole. Tyre retailer's restorations. Die sparklers.



If you take a quick glance at the contents map of *Mapaholics' France* you will soon grasp that I have turned my back on a handful of the country's most famous honeypot tourist areas. One is Provence's Roman triangle to the west and south-west of map 37; another is Mayle terrain to the immediate south of 37. What follows will prove conclusively that the best of France is only discovered by those willing to make the effort to get off-the-beaten-track, armed with appropriate large-scale maps.

As you travel from south to north across map 37, the landscape changes, imperceptibly, mile by mile. South of the **D94** and **D994** (D2/E2/F2), the light and shades of Provence are unmistakable: olive trees, regimented rows of lavender (at their best in July), soil the colour of rust, and the seductive hues of terracotta roof tiles are a few of the clues. Your sense of smell, awoken by the perfume of herb-scented fields, will also tell you that this is Provence. By the time you reach the top edge of the map the landscape is almost exclusively Alpine.

I shall start in the north – in an area where, for reasons I have never been able to determine, Michelin's green guide contribution is an empty 'white hole'. I'll try to correct that unfair omission.

Leave the **Drôme** Valley on the D135 (north of D1) and follow the River **Roanne** south. I've done this drive at all times of the year but the run is at its best at the end of October, when the extravaganza laid on by Mother Nature is a visual knockout. Trees are myriad torches of every hue imaginable – dark coppers, stunning russets, glowing golds and burning reds; and poplars are giant beacons of yellow light – their long candle-shaped forms burn with a searing, dazzling intensity.

Pennes-le-Sec (D1) is a revelation – restored years ago by Charles Piot (1904-80), a tyre retailer. Beyond the hamlet the road climbs through dry Mediterranean scrub to the summit of the **Col de Pennes** (3412 ft). Then, 100 m over the top, you are in cooler woods where broadleaved trees, in late October, wear their autumn cloaks. The view below you is stop-you-in-your-tracks stunning – rated by Bernard Levin in his splendid *Hannibal's Footsteps* as one of the finest he has ever seen. He omitted one visual fact in his brilliant description of the vista: the vineyards in the valley below contribute their annual share to the refreshing Clairette de Die sparklers (they also travel well!).

I have also seen the 'white hole' of mountain terrain in June when I set off, one hot day, on the D27 north from **Serras** (F2). (At the latter see the town hall, near the Fifi Moulin hotel; the 14th-century Romanesque/Provençale *église*; the rue Peuzin; and the unusual *méridienne* sundial on the primary school façade.) At both Sigottier and La Pierre the stream and road force their way through rock walls. The narrow road climbs through woods and past wild roses to the **Col de Carabès** (E1); on your way up your car will crush hundreds of pine cones strewn across the tarmac. On the northern, cooler side, you'll be welcomed by numerous orchids, lilies and wild flowers.

The Col de la Rossas (E1) is an easy climb; the **Col du Fays** (E1) is quite different with the cooler, northern descent literally tunnelling, for several km, through a heavily-wooded hillside of deciduous trees. At **La Charce** (D1) you'll catch your first sight of lime trees. The flowers are collected in the second half of June (later I saw many folk, up ladders, harvesting the crop), dried, and later sold in local markets to make a delicious tea. Note the distillation plant at the northern entrance to La Charce; relish, too, the view of the village as you climb south through a gorge of multi-coloured rock faces. Near Pommerol (E2) metronome-shaped rock slabs are piled high, on top of each other. Further on, stop – and look back at the village, cradled in the col behind the weird rock formations. On the Col de la Fromagère you'll get your first view of the sulking hulk of **Mont Ventoux** (D3).

Before you enter the *pays* called **Les Baronnies** (D2/E2) I'll list some of the other sights to the north and east. The cols (D1) which lead north to the Roanne Valley and **St-Nazaire-le-Désert** (D1) – a land of lavender, pines and oaks, river bathing and chances to buy *chèvre* cheese and *miel*. The ruins of the once vast 12th-century priory at St-André-de-Rosans (E2); only the *église* now remains. The colourful face of the sundial on the *mairie* wall in **Aspres-sur-Buëch** (F1). The 14th-century fortress at **Montmaur** (F1: p.m. July/Aug). The old villages of Savournon and perched **Ventavon** (F2), east of Serres. The **Gorges de la Méouge** (F3) where scenic views, rock sculptures and river bathing all appeal. And, another entry into Les Baronnies, the climb from **Orpierre** (F2) to the **Col de Perty** (E3); at the summit climb 150 m to the *table d'orientation* (4275 ft) for views of Ventoux and, to the east, snow-capped peaks. Detour, too, just after Orpierre, to Ste-Colombe (E3) and its church with a dove (*colombe*) sundial.

I suggest you enter Les Baronnies over the **Col de Soubeyrand** (D2). Lime trees, roses, lavender, apricot and olive trees (the former planted in the most inhospitable spots), vines, herbs and terracotta tiles dominate the landscape in the Ennuye Valley. The same, too, is true of the **Ouvèze** Valley (D3), west of the earlier Baronnies access, the Col de Perty. Hundreds of plane trees make **Buis-les-Baronnies** (D3) one of the shadiest villages in Provence. Every Wednesday there's a renowned market (the famous lime blossom festival is held on the first Wed in July). In June the Ouvèze is a clear, harmless trickle; don't be deceived because, after heavy rain, the same river caused death and destruction in Vaison-la-Romaine (west of D3) in 1992.

Now south towards the ever-closer **Mont Ventoux** (D3). Most tourists never see Ventoux (in Provençal the name is *Ventour*, Windy Mountain) from the north. Don't make that mistake. Detour to **Brantes** and its ruined castle (D3), both stuck like wallpaper to the mountainside; across the valley the massive corrugated wall of Ventoux towers above the village. (Seek out, too, the artisans who make such colourful pottery.) Further east, both Reilhanette (D3) and **Montbrun-les-Bains** (E3) have ruined castles above their village houses. From the D542 Montbrun is especially striking: the château sits above a long line of high-walled houses. Walk

the narrow lanes and you'll quickly grasp why the houses on the south side have as many floors below street level as they do above. The modern thermal baths are to the south, alongside the D189.

Ventoux fascinates me as much as the mountain has every visitor to its lunar-landscape summit over the centuries. The 6263 ft-high peak is frightening – especially when the maniacal *mistral*, roaring and raving, rages across the barren summit. The climb has long been a cycling hell: could there be a more hateful place to die as the spot where Tom Simpson passed away on 13 July 1967 during a Tour de France stage? Do stop at his memorial just below the summit, on the south side, three miles exactly from the D974/D164 junction (D3). The views from the peak are staggering: Mont Blanc, 130 miles away, is clearly visible.

At lower altitudes on Ventoux forests of pine, beech and holm oaks predominate – with plenty of wild roses and weaver birds' nests looking for all the world like lights on Christmas trees. On the D974 to the south (seemingly with a gradient of 1 in 10 all the way), there are hundreds of shady picnic spots. South of **Flassan** (D4) you're in Côtes du Ventoux wine country; there are plenty of chances to buy direct.

The **Gorges de la Nesque** (D4) are a miniature Verdon (map 40: p173). The steep sides are scrub and tree-covered almost all the way. What are not covered are the rock faces – of all shapes, sizes and shades. By far the best rock colouring is at the top of the *gorges*, the Rocher du Cire – a high, rounded face hundreds of feet high. There's no sign of water anywhere until the sight of the *plan d'eau* near Monieux (D4).

As you head east you'll be well aware of the many opportunities to buy *miel de lavande*; lavender fields and hives are all too obvious. One man-made surprise is the Aérospatiale rocket-base alongside the D30, south-east of **Sault** (D4). **Simiane-la-Rotonde** (E4) is worth any detour: seen from the D151 to the east – where you are surrounded by acres of perfumed lavender – the perched semi-circular village, topped by a massive round keep, is visual perfection. Walk the lanes in the village to see the stone houses and buildings at their best. **Banon** (E4) has a church tower high above old houses (the famed *chèvre* cheese, wrapped in a chestnut leaf, takes its name from the village). **Lurs** (F4), another must, has light-coloured stone houses and buildings and is perched high above the Durance. In July the views south-west are a mixture of green, old-gold and sand-coloured fields (arable crops), rows of lavender, and orchards of olive and fruit trees.

Finally, to the **Signal de Lure** (5991 ft) atop the Montagne de Lure (F3) – almost a carbon copy of Ventoux; on the south side the D113 climbs through woods of cedars, pines and holm oaks. From the barren, harsh summit the views north-east are superb; both the Ecrins *massif* and Mont Viso are clearly visible. The D53 descent is an exciting series of hairpin bends down a steep high wall of forested mountainside (plenty of beech trees). A fitting end to another face of Provence.