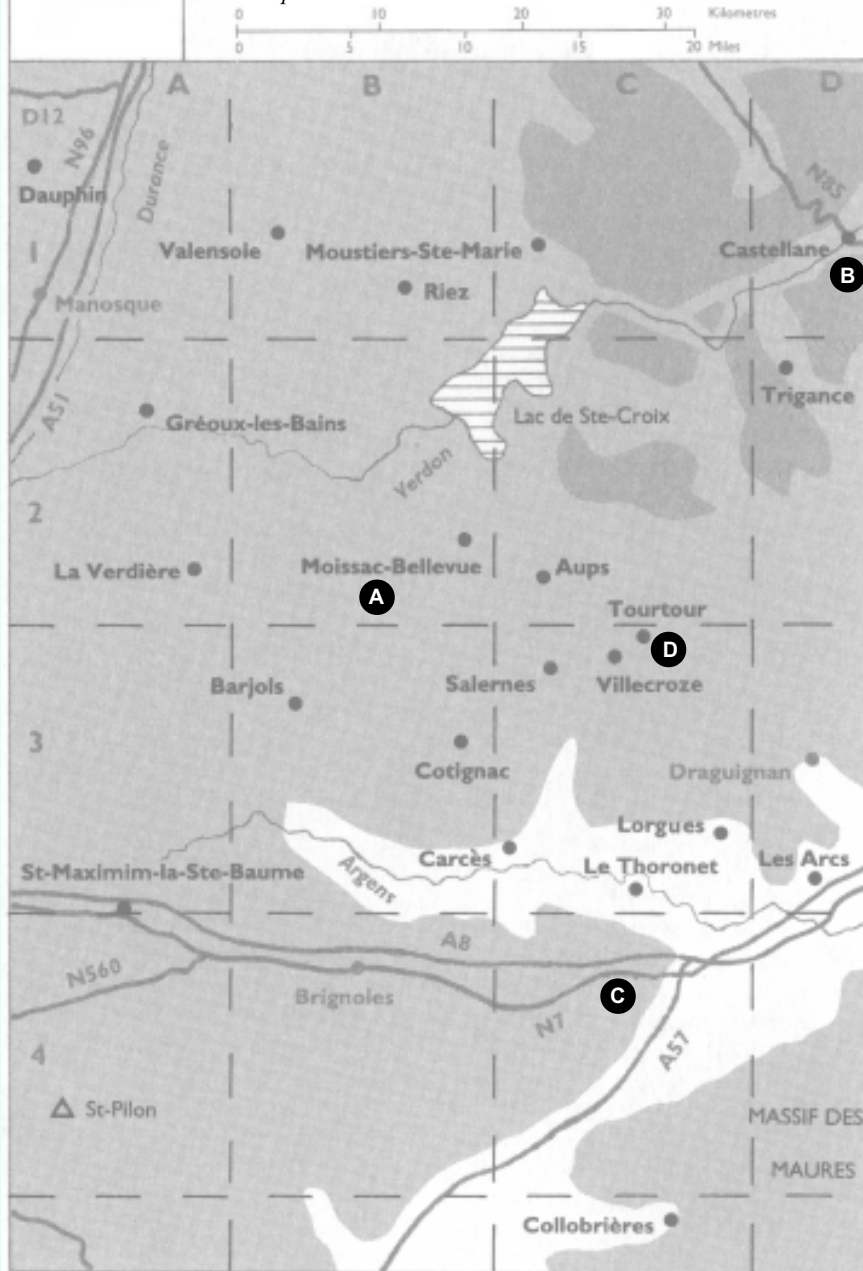


40

Verdon and Var: ancient oaks, Templars and a traffic light. *Carrelages* and pottery. A 2,000ft savagely sculptured slash. Shaded *places* and cool fountains.



Man and Mother Nature combine majestically in the Provençal terrain contained within map 40. In turn your five senses will be tickled and teased: by the herb-scented air and lavender perfume; by wild flowers, forests of oak, beech and chestnut, savage canyons and perched villages with ancient houses; by refreshing wines and copious fruit and vegetables; by church bells, crickets, nightingales and rushing torrents; by the texture of bark on proud trees, the varying styles of pottery and the cooling pleasure of woods and running water.

I have divided the map into three segments: the countryside south of the **A8** autoroute (A4/B4/C4); the terrain between the motorway and the Grand Canyon du **Verdon** (C1/C2); and the *pays* north of the Verdon river. I shall begin with the middle segment – in the Var hills where man's legacy is a series of atmospheric, evocative villages.

Start in the isolated setting of the Cistercian abbey at **Le Thoronet** (C3), a 12th-century creation of simple, exquisite beauty; the cloisters are especially pleasing. Continue west, over the rich red bauxite soil, past the Lac de Carcès and the falls below the dam, to **Carcès** (C3), renowned for its wines and medieval houses. Approach Entrecasteaux (C3) from the south. The part 11th/part 17th-century château, which dominates the village, is a revelation. Restored from a derelict state the interior has all sorts of exhibits (open every day).

On to **Salernes** (C3: market Wed and Sun a.m.), famous for the manufacture of colourful glazed tiles (*carrelages*) and pottery. See the shaded *place*, the fountains and alleys, and the ancient *église*, but then seek out some of the workshops which produce such attractive pots and tiles. The clay, with a high iron-oxide content, comes from local deposits. Two establishments caught my fancy: La Poterie du Soleil (made in the traditional style) and the Carrelages Pierre Boutal with a range of tiles and other pottery creations. Both are on the D560 to the east: the former on the edge of the town, the latter on the outskirts. Stop press: Susie Vogel's Soleil pottery is now at **Villecroze** (C3).

Now head west. At the D560/D22 junction walk for 15 minutes to the waterfall at Sillans-la-Cascade, where the Bresque cascades over a high, wooded cliff. **Cotignac** (B3) has two pluses: the first is no through traffic; the second is the ideal site – nestling in a hollow, protected from the harsh northern winds by a large wall of rock and wooded hills. Old houses, a handsome fountain and a large shaded *place* all please. But do drive to the sanctuary of Notre Dame de Grâces, one km to the south. Shaded by perfumed pines and ringed by a small, terraced garden, the chapel provides a super view of the town and hills.

Where next? To tiny Fox-Amphoux (B3), north-west of Cotignac. Atop a wooded hill, the hamlet is a gem. The site has always been strategically important: the church dates from the 11th century, built by the Templars who settled there. Between the wars the hamlet fell into disrepair when roofs were removed to escape taxes and rates. Slowly the houses are being rebuilt. **Barjols** (B3), built in the form of

an amphitheatre, is renowned for 25 fountains and *lavoirs* (wash-houses), several shaded *places* and a plane tree reputed to be Provence's largest.

A line of four unprepossessing hamlets lie to the north. **La Verdière** (A2) is dominated by an 18th-century château; the first castle on the site was built 1,000 years ago (open every day). Montmeyan (B2) – also founded by the Templars – is a mix of old and new on a small rise. Régusse (B2) sits on a narrow ridge; outside the village is a sports complex of heated pool and tennis courts. **Moissac-Bellevue** (B2) is well named: a perched *village fleuri* with fountain, narrow streets and 12th-century chapel; sadly there are few trees and little shade. **Aups** (C2) is famed for truffles and ham and has a huge shaded *place*, fountains, narrow streets and Provençale Gothic *église*. (A truffle market is held on Thurs a.m. from Nov to Feb.)

Before I finish the Var villages tour let me lead you to a remarkable forest, the like of which is perhaps unique in France. Leave Aups to the north, on the D957; after six km, turn east on the D6 towards Vérignon (C2). In the next four km you'll pass through a medieval oak forest, reckoned to be the oldest in France: how do these stately specimens survive in such difficult cold terrain (over 2000 ft)?

All the southern forests are at risk every year. The *mistral* causes damage of course – but the combination of the maniacal wind plus fire is the most deadly enemy. For example, a decade ago, 2,000 acres of forest were destroyed between Aups and **Tourtour** (C3). All wild life was wiped out; two years passed before birds returned. And, within weeks of the first rain after the fire, myriad wild flowers appeared – many of which had not been seen by local residents for decades.

Ampus (C2) is a tiny spot, ignored by tourists; enjoy the fountain and the views 50 yards to the east. **Tourtour** (C3), the 'village in the sky', came close to being destroyed by fire a decade ago. There are two fountains, a small shaded *place* almost filled with café terrace furniture, and fabulous views from the church above the village (there's also an observation table). At one spot in Tournour the road is so narrow that traffic lights have been installed to prevent vehicles coming to blows.

Villecroze (C3) sits sleepily in a protected site, far below Tournour. North of the village, in the lee of a wooded hill, is a municipal park with gorgeous cypresses, small rose garden, high cascade, stream and caves. Old streets and a Thursday market in the large square are bonuses. Even better is the annual music festival held in the Chapelle St-Victor (an ambitious new custom-built hall is on the drawing board); details from the Syndicat d'Initiative, 83690 Villecroze. See, too, the second branch of La Poterie du Soleil (the Draguignan road to the south-east of the village) where more contemporary pottery is displayed and sold.

Finish your tour with this trio. Flaysoc (C3/D3) has a small, cool square, fountains and a Monday market. **Lorgues** (C3) has a lovely shaded *place*, plane trees,

fountain, old gates and a large *église*. Medieval Les Arcs-sur-Argens (D3: **Les Arcs** on the map) sits atop a rocky spur overlooking the new town; its most noted architectural site is the Provençale-style Romanesque Chapelle Ste-Roseline (to the east) with fine interior treasures (p.m. Wed and Sun; closed Jan/Feb).

Turn now to the map's top segment – where Nature makes a fabulous contribution: the 13 mile-long Grand Canyon du **Verdon** (C1/C2), one of the most stunning sights in Europe. Every visitor to France should detour to the savagely sculptured slash, up to 2000 ft deep, which the Verdon has carved through the limestone rock. One vital tip: make the trip from **Moustiers-Ste-Marie** (C1) to **Castellane** (D1), and back, in a clockwise direction – because then the gorge is always on your right-hand side; you'll park your car more easily at the cliff-side viewpoints and your passengers will get better views.

Surprisingly the canyon is heavily wooded with deciduous trees; in the late autumn the gorge is a luminous, spellbinding sight. One caveat: be careful if you go walking and be sure to set off as well equipped as you can be. Give time to Moustiers-Ste-Marie, clinging to a high cliff, and famed for an overhead star, its individualistic-styled glazed pottery and the Romanesque bell tower of the *église*, built in the Lombard style. Another tip: at La Palud-sur-Verdon (C1) make the D23 23 km-long circuit which is tagged the Route des Crêtes. Rougon (C1) is an eagle's nest high above the Verdon. Stop awhile in Castellane: Napoléon came this way in 1815 on his return from Elba; alleys, fountains, a square, and a giant rock 'cube' overlooking the town, all appeal. **Trigance** (D2) is a delight, a huddle of ancient houses and medieval castle perched high on a mountainside. Aiguines (C2), with squat château and square-towered church, offers extensive views of the man-made **Lac de Ste-Croix** to the south-west. On the tour stop as often as you can.

All types of watersport facilities are available on the lake. Bauduen (B2), with its toes in the water, and Ste-Croix-du-Verdon (B2), perched above the blue lake, are two alternatives. Further west seek out **Riez** (B1), once an important Roman city, and the vast lavender fields north and south of **Valensole** (B1). **Gréoux-les-Bains** (A2), a cool, shady oasis of a spa, is both ancient and modern and both smart and decrepit at the same time. Tiny, perched **Dauphin** (A1) has covered passageways and old houses built with the local limestone.

What else? In segment three, below the A8, head for **St-Maximin-la-Ste-Baume** (A3) and its Gothic-style basilica. Then south to the Ste-Baume *massif* (A4). Local legend claims that Mary Magdalene spent the last 30 years of her life in a cave on the *massif*. Park at either the D95/D80 junction, or at the Hôtellerie, and allow two hours to climb through the beech forest to the Ste-Baume cave and, later, to the fantastic viewpoint of **St-Pilon** (A4) with views of both mountains and the Med. Dense forests are the major attraction of the **Massif des Maures** (C4/D4); cork oaks dominate but, south of **Collobrières** (south of E4), chestnuts are the scenic highlight in the Forêt du Dom. Fires, alas, have left many a blackened scar in the *massif*.