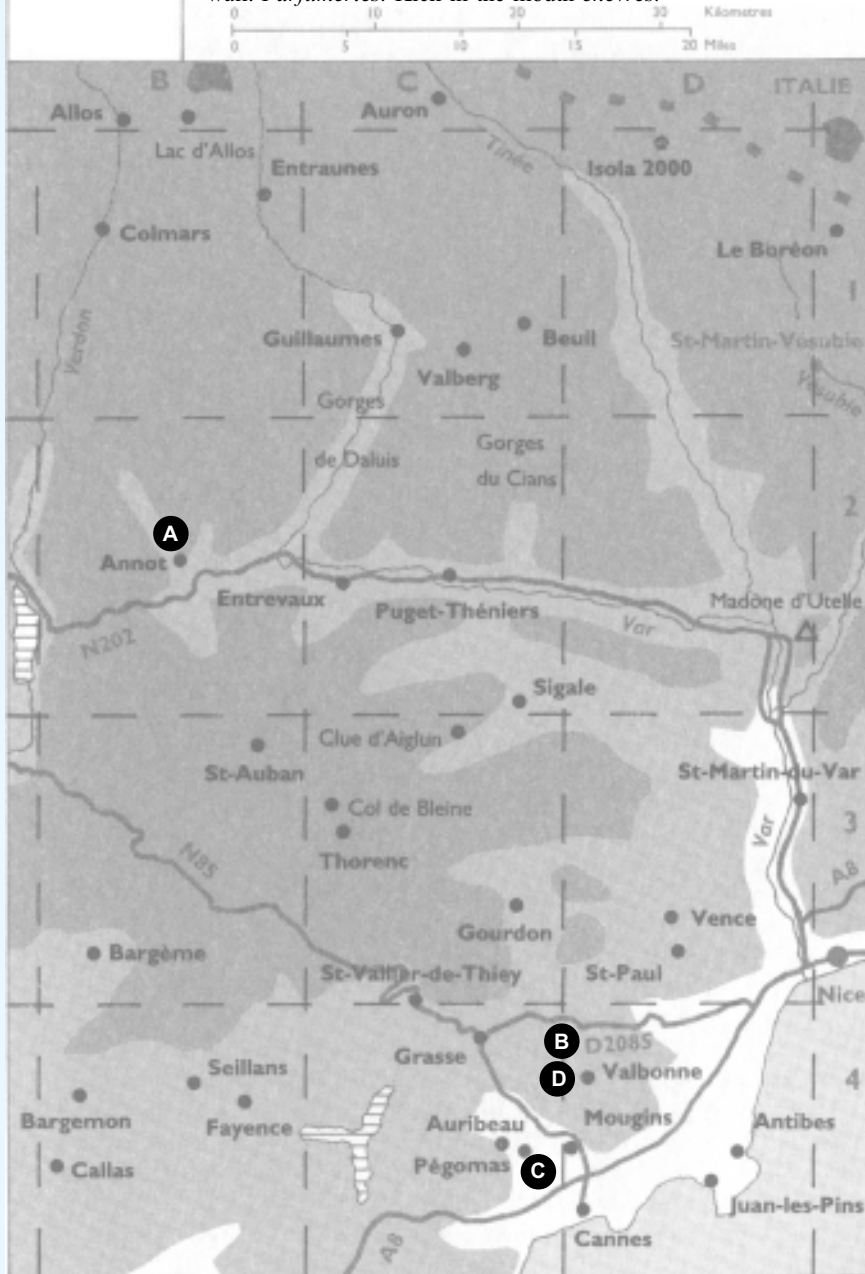


41

L'arrière-pays: perched villages, *clues* and Turk's-cap. *Croisette*. Picasso, Matisse, Renoir and Chagall. Umbilical wall. *Parfumeries*. Kick-in-the-mouth *chèvres*.



In the introduction to the Côte d'Azur chapter in *French Leave Encore* (1992), I was savagely critical about the changes I had witnessed on the coast during the previous 40 years. On my last visit I was horrified, yet again, to see the apparently never-ending development – on both the coastal strip and, alarmingly, in the ever creeping tentacles spreading north of the **A8** autoroute (C4/D4). There seems to be not a single nook or cranny without some sort of building or “development”.

Other than a few references to the coastal strip on the bottom of the map, I shall concentrate entirely on *l'arrière-pays*; for the purposes of this chapter that means all the countryside north of the busy A8.

I have seen the terrain in each of the seasons. In February I have admired the ‘protected’ Massif du Tanneron, west of **Pégomas** (C4), when the hillsides are dressed in yellow – stunning drapes of sparkling mimosa which, in midwinter, do wonders for morale. In May and June I have been bewitched by gardens, terraces and villa walls, blanketed with roses, oleander, bougainvillea, veronica, hibiscus and countless other cultivated plants. Further inland I have been stunned by wild flowers; more about those later. In early summer I have noted the new blooms of the aptly-named ‘smoke trees’ (*cotinus*); but, in October, they become a much more extrovert show, resembling fires of red-hot coals. In the autumn every mountainside is a massive canvas of multi-covered confetti – of gold, copper, red, brown and yellow hues.

Without any shadow of doubt I can safely say that I’ve driven every road on map 41 during the last 50 years, other than a dozen or so of the more remote dead-end lanes. One 22-mile stretch of mountain road is, in my opinion, as exhilarating and exciting as any other in the French Alps. I never grow tired of seeking out the lost valley of the Gironde (C3) and the two mountain walls which guard its scenic thrills; on each visit I enthuse more than ever.

Start your motoring thriller from the D2, just east of **Thorenc** (C3). In May I have walked in the pastures south of the Swiss look-alike resort, treading gingerly on white eiderdowns of wild narcissi. In July I have been thumped in the eyes by the spectacle of hundreds of exotic orange Turk's-cap lilies, growing wild on the southern slopes of the **Col de Bleinc** (Bleyne). At the summit I always turn right and take the dead-end climb to the radio masts: in early spring there are snow-capped peaks to the north; Thorenc nestles in the woods below you; beyond the resort, to the left, are the perched ruins of a 12th-century village (Oppidum de Castellaras on Michelin maps; a lung-testing hike from the D5 below the site); and, if you're lucky, you will spot birds of prey cruising in the thermals around you (humans, too, using the site for hang-gliding). Back at the col note the small memorial to 10 U.S. airmen who parachuted to safety from a B24 bomber on 27 May 1944.

Next comes some heart-in-the-mouth stuff. Descend the hairpins to the north and be absolutely certain to stop on the bend where the red figure ‘5’ is on Michelin map. The view east is sensational. A deep, deep valley of cones, slices, humps and

lumps stretches into the eastern distance; every slope seems to be covered with trees. In the early morning you look into the sun; the view then is more mysterious. In late afternoon the sun, now behind you, illuminates the entire valley. The overriding sensation which makes this one of France's finest natural panoramas is the great depth of the valley. On your descent east do not use the easier D110; rather the D10, a classic Monte-Carlo Rally stage when, invariably, the road is a sheet of slippery ice.

Gasp at Le Mas (C3) on a dizzy perch; and even more so at the **Clue d'Aiglun** (C2), an orange and grey gash through slabs of rock hundreds of feet high; later, spot **Sigale** (C2), high above you, clinging on by its fingernails to the mountainside; and don't forget to look right, just after the *clue* (cleft), for the 100 m-high Cascade de Vegay.

Before we head off into the mountains further north let me tell you of the many attractions, most of which are man-made, in the belt of hills to the immediate north of the A8. This is the land of perched villages. **Gourdon** (C3) is the most spectacular: you feel you are in an aeroplane high in the sky as you look down to the vertigo-inducing Gorges du Loup far, far below you. The Château de Gourdon is renowned for its small but dramatic garden; the terraces pack a real visual punch (open all the year, except Tuesday from October to May).

What of other perched villages? Much refreshed **Auribeau** (C4) is tiny and has a narrow, circular lane within the ancient village. **Mougins** (C4/D4) has the coast's most expensive real estate; at its heart the village resembles a film set. Cabris (C4), west of Grasse, rewards you with extensive views south and is unusual, like **St-Vallier-de-Thiery** (C3) on the Route Napoléon (RN 85: B2/B3), in having large village greens.

Montauroux (C4) and **Fayence** (B4) are bigish places but, as with all the others, both have umbrellas of chestnuts and plane trees and cool fountains. Callian, between the two, also has an unusual waterfall to add to its charms; the site, below a château, is another plus. **Seillans** (B4) has one particularly picturesque fountain (see my drawing on page 77 in *French Leave Favourites*) and some notable *chapelles*. Mons (B4), further inland, is among the oldest of the perched villages; the *table d'orientation* and view are worth the trip alone. Medieval **Bargemon** (B4) is tiny, with a minute shaded *place*; a bonus here, in May/June, is the Col du Bel-Homme, the road a ribbon of wild flowers as you climb to the summit. **Bargème** (B3), further north, is an isolated medieval hamlet, really no more than a church and ruined castle.

Opio (C4), east of Grasse, is a pocket-sized delight. **St-Paul** (D3) is probably the most famous of the perched villages; today the handsome honeypot site is a touch too precious and, arguably, is the most crowded.

If time permits, visit the following, despite my present-day cynicism in paragraph one!. **Cannes** (D4) has its sophisticated Croisette, alongside the Med, but the narrow rue Meynadier is more of a temptation for me, especially the many food

shops. Old **Antibes** (D4) and the glamorous, wooded resort of **Juan-les-Pins** (D4) are totally different in character. **Vence** (D3) is another honeypot tourist trap; and you'll either love or hate Matisse's Chapelle du Rosaire on the northern outskirts. Vallauris (D4), made famous by Picasso, will appeal to any of you interested in pottery; a nearby new motoring museum, financed by Adrien Maeght, is a must for motoring nuts (access also from A8: D4).

The names Matisse and Maeght remind me of other museums worth seeking out. Remember the coast was a landscape where the light and vistas inspired many master artists: Matisse, Renoir, Picasso and Chagall among them. Visit the Picasso Museum in the Château Grimaldi at Antibes; Renoir's old home at Les Colettes in Cagnes-sur-Mer (D4); and the Maeght Foundation at **St-Paul** (D3), a home of fine contemporary art.

Do not leave the southern borders of the map without paying a call on the cool hill station of **Grasse** (C4: despite the ghastly traffic) and its small market: the *parfumeries* Molinard and Fragonard should be seen at least once (guided tours are free; you don't have to buy perfumes though resistance levels are inevitably low by the end). Don't miss either the Confiserie des Gorges du Loup at Pont-du-Loup (D3), west of Vence; here guided tours are also free – but I have yet to leave empty-handed as the crystallised fruits are just too tempting.

Three quite different shops. First, Roger Casoni's L'Etable cheese shop in the rue Sade, Antibes, where his *chèvre* selection is both an eye-opener and a kick-in-the-mouth experience. Next, the evocative La Bolognaise (Chez César) in Pégomas, a treasure trove of Italian goodies (alas, now closed). Finally, the Moulin de **Callas** (B4), north-east of Draguignan, where, since 1928, the finest quality olive oil has been pressed.

Olive oil reminds me to tell you about one of the most impressive characters I know, Marc Streitz. Over a decade ago, when his mother died, Marc returned to the 2,000 olive trees she had so lovingly nursed for over 30 years. "To put my fingers back into the earth, a much better way of life than being a bad architect," he laughingly explains.

Marc's olives and olive oil are second to none. So is his other business, supplying quality vegetables, grown 100 per cent naturally, to a handful of chefs within a brief drive of the estate. One new piece of excellent news: Marc now provides bed and breakfast at his home among the olive trees. Contact him at the Colline de Peirabelle, 06560 **Valbonne** (D4) (tel 04 93 12 00 29). How do you find him? Head south from Valbonne for one km on the D3; 100 m past the Auberge Fleurie turn right and continue for 500 metres; the estate is on the right.

If Nature's handiwork interests you then visit a trio of underground caves near **St-Vallier-de-Thiery** (C3): the 40 m-long Grottes de St-Cézaire (C4), noted for a rich variety of stalagmites and stalactites and remarkable colourings; the Grotte de la Baume Obscure, where water plays the most important part; and the Domaine des Grottes des Audides, known for impressive formations and river springs.

Now let's head north again, into glorious mountains and valleys. If I have missed out anything among the sights on the southern borders then I apologise: the older I get the more I itch to escape the rush and crush of *la côte* and head for the heavenly peace of the mountains.

There are numerous scenic roads for you to nose out. The Col de Vence (D3) has a panoramic reward at its summit. The D27 (D2), which runs high above the **Var**, is a thrill-a-minute drive from **St-Martin-du-Var** (D3) to **Puget-Théniers** (C2). The run from Sigale (C2), past the Clue du Riolan and down to the Var or, better still, west to **St-Auban** (B3), is not too demanding. Enjoy St-Auban and its *clue*, where the road and stream share the slit in the rocks. Retrace your steps to Briançonnet and climb north on the steep Col du Buis. On to **Entrevaux** (C2) and, as you descend, you have a remarkable aspect of the medieval village, on the far bank of the Var, and its citadel, high above the houses, linked together by the nine zigzags of an umbilical wall.

Puget-Théniers (C2) is the home of two fascinating attractions. First, have a look at the map and the gaggle of roads to the north: visit Puget-Rostang; the eagle's nest of Auvare; La Croix, perched above the Gorges de la Roudoule; the high bridge at Pont de St-Léger, a vital link for the village of St-Léger; and remote Léouvé. A highly commendable and inventive enterprise called the Ecomusée du Pays de la Roudoule has been set up in this remote mountain pocket (Easter to end September; closed Monday). Several sites tell the story of man's life in the harsh terrain, describe the surrounding environment, and explain the unusual geology of its red rocks. The main *maison* is at Puget-Rostang (call there first); other villages also make their own contributions. Especially noteworthy are three churches (at Puget-Rostang, La Croix and St-Léger) which, each year, show the rich, colourful 15th-century work (*splendeurs du retable* – altar piece) of Louis Bréa.

The other attraction is the metre-gauge railway which links Digne to Nice (diesel car service). In 1980 an old steam engine was revived to do the short hop between **Puget-Théniers** (C2) and **Annot** (B2); on most Sundays (June to September) this Train des Pignes does the run. Alas, I hear the steamer is under threat of closure; enthusiasts are running up a real head of steam and locals believe the enterprise will be saved. The company which owns the Digne-Nice line is the Chemins de Fer de Provence. They run all sorts of special services; for details write to 40 rue Clément Roassal, 06007 Nice Cedex 1 (04 93 88 34 72).

For something totally different, leave the N202 a few miles east of Annot and climb to Braux (B2). Then, north of the hamlet, nose out the yard-wide irrigation canal which brings water from the River Coulomp, a few kilometres to the north. You can follow the canal on foot; but take care. If you really want to get off-the-beaten-track, turn off the D908 north of Annot and drive and walk to the remote hamlets of Argenton and La Beauge, above the Coulomp and where the canal starts.

Two fabulous gorges straddle the map squares C1/C2 to the north of Puget-Théniers: the **Gorges du Cians** and the **Gorges de Daluis**. The most fascinating geological feature is the dark iron-ore red band of slate, a few miles deep, which cuts, east to west, across the central sections of both gorges. Today, numerous new tunnels and extensive road widening, in both gorges, have taken away the best parts of what were once memorable driving adventures. The Cians is the more astonishing; park your car at many of the new tunnels and walk the old, narrow roads to appreciate the steep cliffs, almost touching in places, and the turbulent, tumbling river as it rushes down to the Var. Don't rush past the site called Grande Clue (C1) and look out, too, just to the north, for numerous saxifrages growing out of the rust-shaded rock faces. The Daluis is less extrovert but, once again, leave your car at the entrances to the new tunnels and set off on foot to admire the deep gorge below you. In both cases the red rocks provide the special splendour.

At the top of the Cians you enter a refreshingly different world from the dusty Var Valley. By **Beuil** (C1) you're in an Alpine environment of stone and timber houses and chalets, massive pines and emerald pastures. **Valberg** (C1), at 1700 m, is an ever-growing winter sports resort. To the west are several villages worth a detour. Step back in time at: Péone (C1), built of stone and with rock needles dominating the isolated huddle of houses; **Guillaumes** (C1), much bigger, and in the Var Valley, is in the shadow of castle ruins atop a yellow and grey outcrop of rock (market day is Thursday); Sauze, at the end of an eight km climb with endless hairpins, has a richly decorated church; likewise Châteauneuf-d'Entraunes (C1), a perched village facing south; and Villeneuves-d'Entraunes, St-Martin-d'Entraunes and **Entraunes** (B1) – all in the Var Valley and all three with churches and fountains.

Of the three mighty passes that snake north – the Col de la Bonette, 9193 ft (north of C1), the Col de la Cayolle, 7634 ft (north of B1), and the Col d'Allos, 7349 ft (north of B1) – I prefer the last because, at **Allos** village (B1), you can head east up a fantastic dead-end to the **Lac d'Allos**, 7313 ft (north of B1). Allow 45 minutes each way for the pulsating (literally) walk from the car park to the azure lake. Another reason I prefer the Allos is the fortified town of **Colmars** (B1); especially noteworthy are the two Vauban forts straddling the strategic site.

I am running out of space and there's so much more for me to implore you to see. The climb to the **Madone d'Utelle** (D2), a 15 km-run from 285 m to an observation platform, under a strange umbrella-like roof, at 1174 m. The dead-end road to **Le Boréon** (east of D1), a wonderland of flora and fauna in the Mercantour National Park. The many exhilarating hillclimbs from the left bank of the Var; the most notable is the ascent to La Roquette (D3), a famed rally stage. The winter resorts of **Auron** (north of C1), 5276 ft; and **Isola 2000** (D1), 6562 ft, and the finish of a tortuously cruel stage on the 1993 Tour de France when, after tackling the Izoard (7742 ft), Vars (6912 ft) and Bonette (9193 ft) cols, the cyclists had to face the D97's 31 hairpins as the road snakes 10 miles, and 3675 ft, up into the mountains from Isola.