



FRANCE'S BEST-KEPT SECRET

You will probably not have heard about the beauty of the Vaucluse, a lesser known area of Provence – and the French would like it to stay that way...

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When Peter Mayle published his bestselling book, *A Year in Provence*, he made himself hugely unpopular with his French neighbours. It wasn't just that the locals in his neck of the woods were rather unfairly portrayed as slow-witted, suspicious and lazy – it was more that he revealed far too many local secrets; such as the fine wines, wonderful restaurants and scented magical landscapes of the Luberon valley.

Mayle, who moved to the South of France to live the rustic rural dream, failed to realise that telling millions of Brits, Germans and Americans about the best bars, wineries and cafés in the region might be more than simply a faux pas. That's because while the French don't mind us visiting from time to time, they'd rather like to keep the best bits for themselves.

Fortunately, Mayle forgot to include the equally beautiful, equally magical, Vaucluse region, just a few hillsides north of the Luberon, in his bestseller. The Vaucluse is one of the *départements*, or counties, that make up the southern French region of Provence. It is an ►

area of hilltop villages, sleepy markets, quiet village bars, bold and memorable wines and, every now and then, brilliant rustic cuisine.

You will know you're in the Vaucluse when Mont Ventoux, the 'Giant of Provence', is dominating the skyline. The Ventoux's pyramid peak overlooks the heart of the *département*, the Comtat Venaissin. In high summer, as the heat settles on the south of France, the mid-afternoon temperatures nudge 40 degrees; in mid-winter, with the Mistral wind blowing down the Rhône valley, the wind chill at the frozen summit of the Ventoux can drop to -40.

The mountain glares down from its summit at millions of hectares of vineyards, olive groves, orchards and, on its slopes, centuries-old forest that is home to wild boar, hare and mouflon (a mountain sheep that looks like a goat).

In summer, a warm breeze carries the scent of cypress and lavender over the hills, a chorus of cicadas accompanies the afternoon siesta and dinner is eaten late, as the burning sun settles over the Rhône valley.

In winter, with snow dusting the hills, brilliant sunlight and blue skies pick out the burnished ancient stone of church towers, monasteries and hilltop chateaux. At night, it's cold enough to huddle around a log fire, tuck into wild boar stew and enjoy a bottle of local red wine.

The little villages dotted across the Ventoux foothills: Bedoin, Blauvac, Malaucene, Venasque (once named the prettiest village in France), Sault, Crillon-le-Brave, Le Barroux, Flassan, are all medieval in character. In each one, the weekly market, the morning visit to the boulangerie and an aperitif, or 'apéro', in the local bar, remain the focal point of daily life.

The rhythms of life in the Comtat Venaissin have changed little in hundreds of years; the changes in the seasons are punctuated by the harvesting of grapes, olives and fruit, summer dominated by the long wait for rain.

This is *Jean de Florette* country – the celebrated 1986 film was shot in the area – and the vigilant fire crews and arid, parched vineyards tell their own story. It is a region so dry that in high summer, the locals gather in the street to celebrate a shower of rain.

The largest city in the area is Avignon and before the Papal seat returned to Rome in 1377, the Catholic church was governed from the fortified city on the banks of the Rhone river, a short drive from the foot of the Ventoux.

The cavernous and imposing Palais des Papes may not be on the same scale as the Vatican, but it towers over the city's old walls with sombre intent. Avignon has a great shopping centre, many good cafés and patisseries and numerous restaurants. But it's in the countryside, on a balmy summer's

EAT LIKE A LOCAL

L' AUTRE COTE DU LAVOIR, ST DIDIER
T 04 90 66 15 60

Family-run restaurant with a classic French menu.

ENTRE POTES, LE BARROUX
T 04 90 62 36 94

A father-son eatery with a terrace and lovely views.

CAFÉ DE LA GARE, BONNIEUX
T 04 90 75 82 00

An institution that revives the routier cafes of the past.

CHOCOLATERIE DU CRESTET, VAISON-LA-ROMAINE
T 04 75 98 33 28

Eye-popping range of chocolate and other treats.

LE MESCLUN, SEGURET
T 04 90 46 93 43

Grown-up French food, but not well-suited to families.



Here, the rhythms of life have changed little in hundreds of years



afternoon, that the Vaucluse is in its element.

Take a tour through the vineyards at the foot of the Dentelles de Montmirail, where a row of jagged cliffs overlook the picture-perfect village of Seguret and the vineyards of Gigondas, Vacqueyras, Rasteau and others. There's a wine producer at almost every turn, including the dessert winemakers at Beaumes de Venise, and tasting the fruits of a season's labour is an essential part of any trip here.

The lesser-known producers, tucked away to the east towards the Monts de Vaucluse, are also worth visiting. One British-owned favourite, the Chateau d'Unang, soon after you leave Malemort-du-Comtat on the road to Methamis, is approached on a dirt track, past ancient chateau gardens, elegant horses and sleepy dogs. There won't be any tourist buses parked outside when you drive up.

Although some French traditionalists remain a little cool towards them, the robust red wines of Côtes du Rhône and Côtes du Ventoux remain big business here. But then, in this ruggedly beautiful part of Provence, so are truffles, olives and fruit-growing.

The best truffles are highly prized, (as are the best truffle-hunting dogs). A few years ago at the winter truffle festival in Carpentras, a heavily-



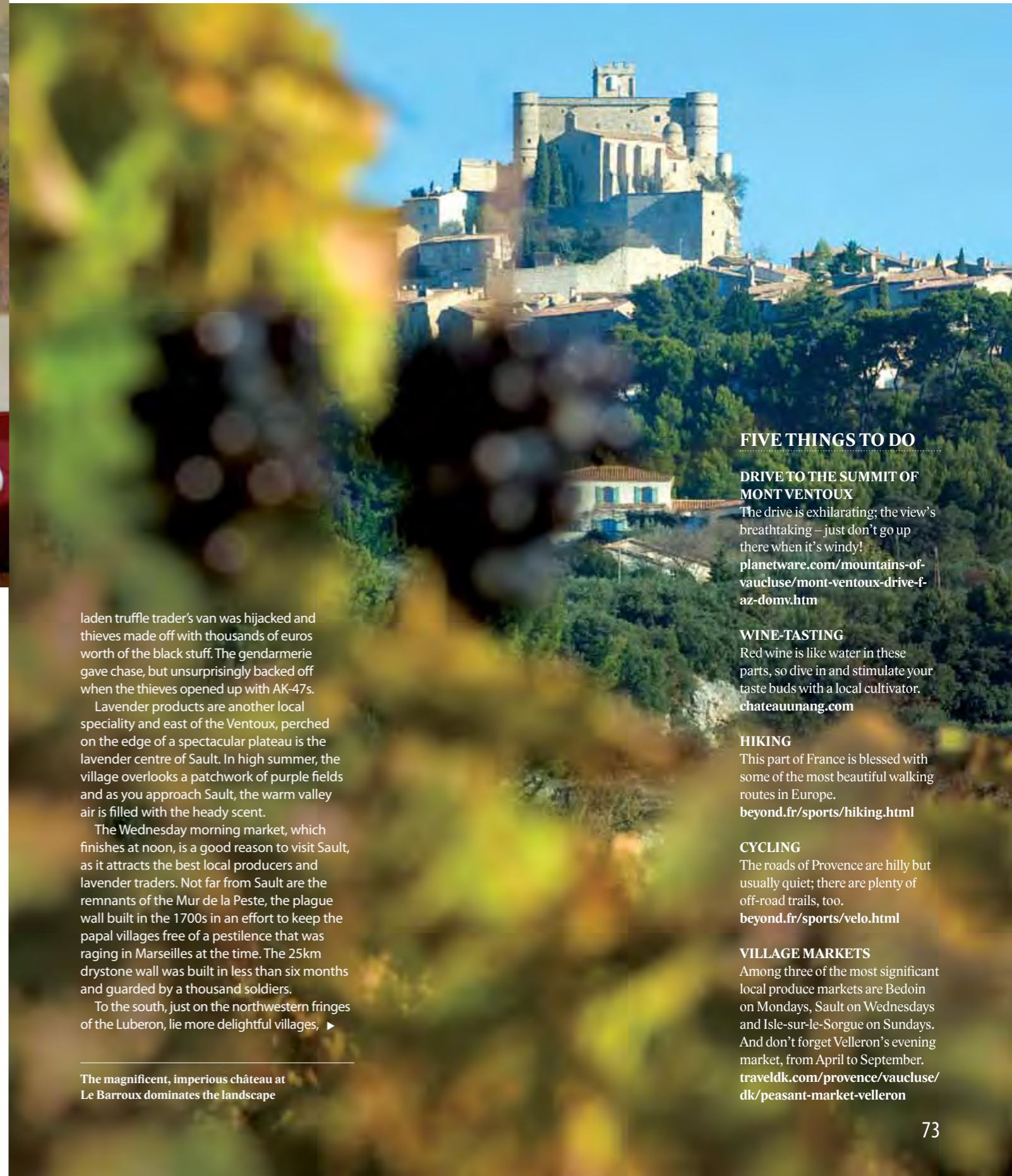
laden truffle trader's van was hijacked and thieves made off with thousands of euros worth of the black stuff. The gendarmerie gave chase, but unsurprisingly backed off when the thieves opened up with AK-47s.

Lavender products are another local speciality and east of the Ventoux, perched on the edge of a spectacular plateau is the lavender centre of Sault. In high summer, the village overlooks a patchwork of purple fields and as you approach Sault, the warm valley air is filled with the heady scent.

The Wednesday morning market, which finishes at noon, is a good reason to visit Sault, as it attracts the best local producers and lavender traders. Not far from Sault are the remnants of the Mur de la Peste, the plague wall built in the 1700s in an effort to keep the papal villages free of a pestilence that was raging in Marseilles at the time. The 25km drystone wall was built in less than six months and guarded by a thousand soldiers.

To the south, just on the northwestern fringes of the Luberon, lie more delightful villages, ►

The magnificent, imperious château at Le Barroux dominates the landscape



FIVE THINGS TO DO

DRIVE TO THE SUMMIT OF MONT VENTOUX

The drive is exhilarating; the view's breathtaking – just don't go up there when it's windy!
planetware.com/mountains-of-vaucluse/mont-ventoux-drive-faz-domv.htm

WINE-TASTING

Red wine is like water in these parts, so dive in and stimulate your taste buds with a local cultivator.
chateaunang.com

HIKING

This part of France is blessed with some of the most beautiful walking routes in Europe.
beyond.fr/sports/hiking.html

CYCLING

The roads of Provence are hilly but usually quiet; there are plenty of off-road trails, too.
beyond.fr/sports/velo.html

VILLAGE MARKETS

Among three of the most significant local produce markets are Bedoin on Mondays, Sault on Wednesdays and Isle-sur-le-Sorgue on Sundays. And don't forget Velleron's evening market, from April to September.
traveldk.com/provence/vaucluse/dk/peasant-market-velleron

HIDDEN GEM: THE VAUCLUSE

such as Fontaine de Vaucluse and the bustling antique centre of Isle-sur-la-Sorgue – the ‘Venice of Provence’ – which is, after Paris, the most prominent collector’s market in France.

The Sorgue river emerges from steep cliffs in Fontaine-de-Vaucluse and wends its way west. It’s possible to hire a kayak in the village and paddle through the shallow clear waters to Isle-sur-la-Sorgue. It’s a dreamy way to while away a summer afternoon.

Isle’s Sunday morning market, running along the canals and waterways, is always packed and brings together everything from goat’s cheese and antique maps to T-shirts and hunting hats.

On from there, you’re back in Mayle country, so you probably already know all you need to. Except perhaps, that the unique and charming Café de la Gare, hidden in the valley below Bonnieux and home to the best *prix fixe* lunch in the region, is thankfully still going strong.

Below: British-owned wine producer Château Unang is worth a visit; the chapel at Pierrelongue



THE FACTS

The Vaucluse, France



Everything you need to know about how to make your trip a truly memorable one

VITAL STATISTICS

WHEN TO GO

Provence is a year-round destination, hot and dry in summer and, particularly in the hills, very chilly in winter. The spring months – March and April – are less extreme, while a late summer visit in September avoids the intense Provençal heat.

LOCATION

East of Avignon, north of Marseilles, inland from the Mediterranean.

CLIMATE

Hot in high summer, cold in winter: can be a climate of extremes.

GETTING THERE

Avignon is approximately nine hours driving time from Calais and Marseilles is 90 minutes from London airports.

WHAT'S ON THE MENU

Truffles, foie gras, numerous goat’s cheeses, wild boar, lamb, rabbit, mountain mushrooms, seafood – the Mediterranean is 90 minutes away – dried sausage, nougat, olive bread, all washed down by some of the best red and rosé wine in Europe.

INSIDER TIP

Start looking for a table for lunch before your stomach rumbles; leave it until one o’clock and you will go hungry because everywhere will be full!



Tempted? Now go...

4 nights for the price of 3

Book a four-night break to Avignon with Approved Partner The Co-operative Travel departing 4 May 2010. Prices start at just £399pp, staying at the three-star De L’Horloge Hotel*. Plus enjoy your additional five per cent CSMA Club Member discount.

For more information, or to book, log onto csmaclub.co.uk/holidays or call 0845 293 0687 quoting ‘CSMA’.

*The De L’Horloge Hotel is a three-star hotel with 66 bedrooms, just 5.5 miles from the airport in the heart of the city and is ideally situated to explore the Vaucluse.

Ts & Cs: Offer subject to availability, prices are per person and may change without notice. Offer based on departure from Southampton airport on 4 May 2010. Prices based on two people sharing twin/double room. Flights included. Transfers not included. Full Ts & Cs apply.

