

Va Va Voom

Tristan Rutherford revs up for five great road trips in the South of France

PHOTO: GELLY



The Boy Racer Monaco Grand Prix

Racing around Monaco's Grand Prix circuit is not quite as exclusive as it sounds. Power through the principality and you'll likely be tailed by a posse of German, Swiss and Russian F1 enthusiasts – many of them male, middle-aged and wearing dodgy Ferrari caps.

The action starts on Boulevard Albert 1er. Lines of rubber, burnt into tarmac as the pack steams forward from the start lights, are clearly visible. After a tight right, the circuit winds up to the fabled Hôtel de Paris (en.hoteldeparismontecarlo.com) on Casino Square, whose Garnier Suite becomes the world's most expensive hotel room on Grand Prix weekend. Attention is needed: prang any of the Maseratis or Bugattis parked outside and your grandchildren will be paying premiums for you.

The route then corkscrews seawards past Ayrton Senna's former apartment. The Brazilian maverick, who tragically died in a crash at the 1994 San Marino Grand Prix, still holds the Monaco record with six sublime victories. A hairpin sweeps drivers into the tunnel, the fastest part of the circuit, and the lack of traffic lights means you can press your pedal to the metal as the gloriously azure Mediterranean flashes along on your left-hand side.

After a final weave around Monaco's outdoor swimming pool, the route finishes with the chequered flag outside the Fédération Internationale de l'Automobile HQ. If you neared Sebastian Vettel's record lap of 1 minute 15 seconds, pop in for a celebratory glass of champagne. If not, too bad. You'll have to settle for a Ferrari fridge magnet from any of the quayside gift shops. ►

Antibes

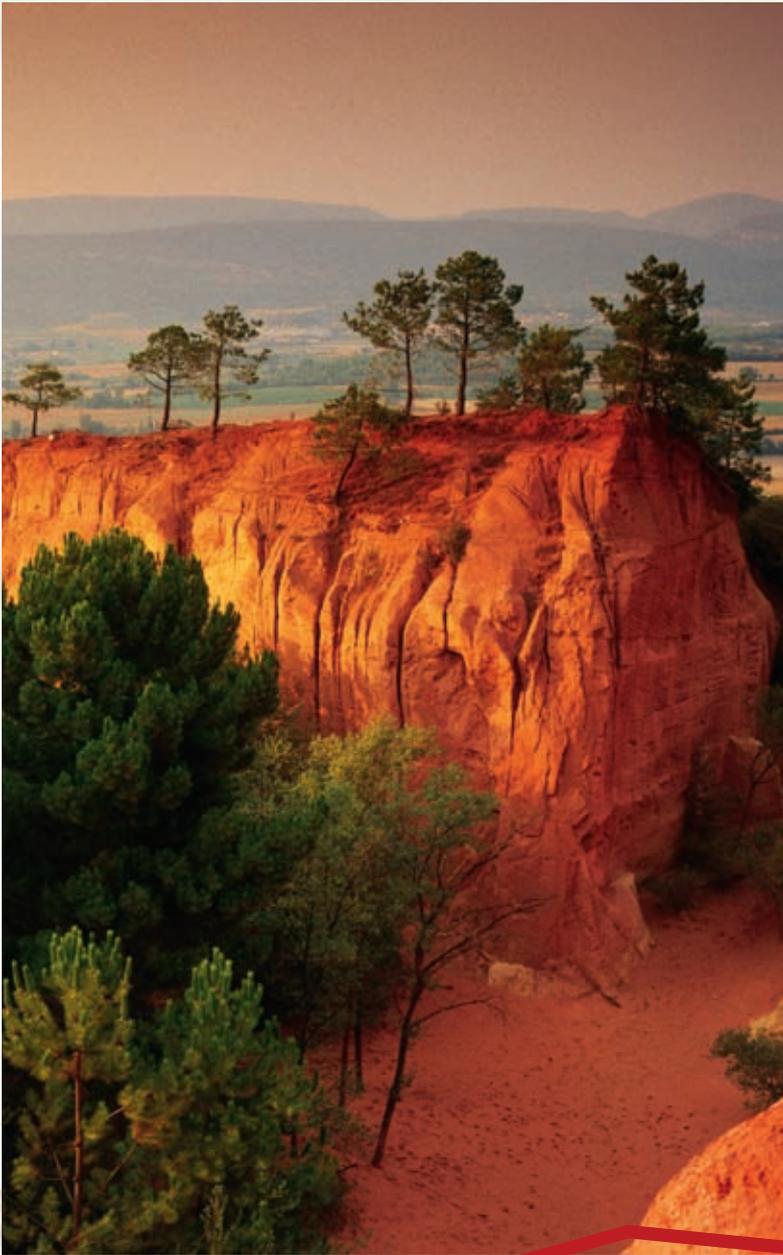


The Cliffhanger Gorges du Verdon

The Gorges du Verdon – Europe’s very own Grand Canyon – was carved out of the earth by an unstoppable glacier thousands of years ago. This awesome chasm remained off-map until 1906, when it was discovered during a routine survey by state electricity company EDF. The cliff-top road that tiptoes around its northern edge is one of France’s most awe-inspiring (and buttock-clenching) drives, and it’s with good reason that the loop from La Palud allows one-way traffic only.

The route starts with a steep forest climb to several breathtaking *belvédères*, or viewing stations. From the first you can see

the 700m-drop down to the turquoise riverbed that once formed the glacier’s base. A sign informs visitors not to throw stones over the flimsy handrail: if you did it would take more than ten seconds to hit the bottom. The second parking stop – the *Belvédère de Trescaire* – is even more impressive. A pack of giant Bonelli’s eagles frequently circles overhead, while rock climbers clamber up the cliffs. At *Belvédère de Glacières*, look out for *Pont de l’Artuby* across the gorge, a spine-chilling bridge that serves as one of Europe’s highest bungee-jumping stations. If you’ve got the nerve, hurtling yourself off a ledge is an unorthodox way to break up a drive. The final bends soften back to the safety of La Palud through pine forests and meadows.



• This spread (clockwise from far left): Gorges du Verdon; Roussillon's ochre tones; an *village perché*, Lacoste.
 • Previous: the Monte-Carlo cityscape



The Lavender Route Gordes to Bonnieux

This lazy loop through *A Year In Provence* country takes in medieval castles and honey-coloured stone houses, as well as plenty of purple lavender fields. Start at the medieval Abbaye de Sénanque. The abbey's monks have been cloistered away here since 1148, and those hoping for a bit of country contemplation can join them for a week-long spiritual retreat (men only, naturally). Coast through Gordes: La Renaissance, the classy local boozier on the main square is where Russell Crowe's character successfully courted the local skirt in the movie *A Good Year*.

Southern French topography ranges from the sub-tropical to the Alpine, and the route quickly rises into pine forests before the blood-red village of Roussillon. This sleepy Lubéron town was the centre of production for ochre (an earth-coloured clay) for centuries, and the network of trails through yellow, orange and russet-brown valleys still tempt walkers today. It's back down to vineyard country as the road races between long alleys of shady oak trees to two precipitous *villages perchés*, or perched villages, which mark the end of the route. The first is panoramic Bonnieux, followed by postcard-perfect Lacoste. The latter's village castle once belonged to the controversial Marquis de Sade, who no doubt scandalised this traditional area of France. ▶



The Route Des Crêtes Cassis to La Ciotat

The boring name for the road that corkscrews between the seaside villages of La Ciotat and Cassis is the D141. The local name, however, is the Route des Crêtes (the “crest road”), and it offers more magnificent panoramas than a fly-past in a private jet.

In true rollercoaster style, the road from La Ciotat climbs and climbs, with anticipation rising with every vertiginous switchback. Road signs halfway up warn drivers not to attempt the passage in windy weather.

At 400m lies the Grande Tête, or “big head”, Europe’s highest seaside cliff. From here the road barrels downwards, offering glimpses of the turquoise *calanque* (inlet) creeks that gash the shore’s limestone cliffs. Each heady twist offers a sensation similar to being in a wind tunnel, and drivers must be on full alert.

After another inland climb, the route’s final section guns seaward with unobstructed vistas of the Mediterranean. Marseille’s Frioul archipelago bobs in the distance before the final downhill dip into Cassis’s cute town centre.

• Left: the winding coastal road to Marseilles. • Below right: the Riviera’s cove-dotted coast

The Secret Beach Bonanza Cap d’Ail to Cap Ferrat

The long public beaches at Cannes and Nice can get as congested as the Paris Périphérique in summer. However, the Riviera’s offbeat coves rarely fill up. Cap d’Ail beach is where *le jetset* of nearby Monaco hang out in linen-shaded beach bars. What is almost certainly the world’s prettiest one-way system leads drivers through a neighbourhood of bougainvillea-strewn *belle époque* mansions.

Some two miles further along the clifftop coast road you’ll find the Deux Tunnels bus stop. The brave can park up here, then walk down to the Eden-esque naturist beach below – without the help of pockets, take care to keep hold of your car keys. Driving westwards, the Alpes Maritimes

mountain range crashes into the sea, punctuated only by a few great beaches.

Bono calls the sandy stretch at Eze-sur-Mer home, while a juiced-up Rolling Stones recorded *Exile On Main Street* near Villefranche beach. Finish off with a loop around Cap Ferrat, a palm-lined driver’s dream running past a dozen multi-millionaire play pads. The assumed exclusivity puts off most visitors to the cape’s secret beaches, including chic Paloma Plage, windswept Plage des Fosses and family friendly Plage de Passable. Don’t let it – these are among the most gorgeous beaches in the Riviera.

Wheel Deals

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