

Marseille & Western Provence

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Western Provence conjures up a volley of sun-kissed images. From lavender fields (the Lubéron), Cézanne paintings (Aix-en-Provence) and *French Connection* chase scenes (Marseille) to panoramas of *pétanque* players, hilltop villages and pavement cafés (all three just about anywhere in the region), this region is France at its most beautiful. And for every celebrated shot, there's another cover-shoot portrait waiting to be discovered. Dip your toes into the Calanques's turquoise inlets, ride bareback along the beaches of the Camargue or cheer on the summertime bull races at Arles's Roman Amphithéâtre and you'll see what we mean.

Waves of invaders have claimed a piece of the above for over two millennia, and who can blame them? They may have soaked up more than their share of Provence's sun and drunk vats of its wine, but in return they left one of the most vibrant cultural legacies in Europe. From the banks of the Rhône to the jagged peaks of the Lubéron mountains, there are more castles, museums, forts, amphitheatres and rococo mansions than most countries possess in their entirety. And with a little dedication, a fair share of these sights can be visited over a single week. Visit once and you'll discover that a year in Provence is a very tempting proposal.

Marseille & the Calanques

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Marseille revels in its appointment as Europe's 2013 Capital of Culture (marseille-provence2013.fr). A driving factor behind the council's unanimous vote is the city's ongoing **Euroméditerranée project** (see page 27). A master plan for Marseille's urban regeneration, it includes the long-awaited **Musée des Civilisations de l'Europe et de la Méditerranée** (MuCEM, see page 28), now partially complete and holding temporary exhibitions in Fort St-Jean, plus a new 3-km seafront esplanade and many other developments.

The non-stop action is not just downtown: during summer, locals hit the city beach, **Plage des Catalans**. True sun-worshippers would do better to head to the stunning western Calanques (see page 37) or south to the **Plage du Prado** seaside park. Near the latter, pretty **Parc Borély**, with its rowing lake, and the **Musée d'Art Contemporain** ① **MAC**, 69 av de Haïfa, T04 91 25 01 07, lesartistescontemporains.com/macmarseille.html, Tue-Sun 1100-1700, €3, €1.50 over 65s, under 18s free, make for great days out.

Vieux Port

① M1 to 'Vieux Port'.

It was here (or near enough) that Greeks are said to have dropped anchor and founded the ancient metropolis of Massalia. Today, Marseille's old port remains the city's hub. To the north lies Le Panier, the true Old Town, while La Canebière, Marseille's central but slightly scruffy main drag, runs from the port eastwards to Palais Longchamp. The newly restored rue de la République also radiates out from here, its first few blocks lined with high street chains, its buildings Parisian-sparkly and uplift as the wide road makes straight for place de la Joliette. Bars and restaurants crowd the pedestrian streets that wind their way through the neighbourhood south of the Vieux Port.

The harbour itself is flanked by 17th-century Fort St-Nicolas and Fort St-Jean, and packed with pleasure boats. Frequent ferries (see page 35) run to the Château d'If, Frioul islands – visible on the horizon from the mouth of the port – and the nearby Calanques. As day breaks fishermen drag their catch on to the quai des Belges, setting up stalls for the daily fish market; chefs and locals soon arrive, shopping for local red mullet, rockfish and the makings of *bouillabaisse* (see page 32).

Musée de l'Histoire de Marseille and Jardin des Vestiges (Port Antique)

① *Square Belsunce, Centre Bourse, T04 91 90 42 22. Mon-Sat 1200-1900. €3, €2 over 65s, under 18s free. M1 to 'Vieux Port'. Map: Marseille, D3, p24. Note that both the Musée de l'Histoire de Marseille and Jardin des Vestiges will remain closed until the end of 2012 as they undergo restorations in preparation for Marseille Capital of Culture 2013.*

Accessed via the ground level of the Centre Bourse, traces of the city's ancient Roman port and Greek city walls are contained within the open-air Jardin des Vestiges. Discovered during the shopping centre's construction in 1967, the ruins are complemented by the adjacent Marseille History Museum. Exhibits cover finds from the port, including an ancient merchant vessel discovered in 1974, models of the Greek city and late 19th-century advertisements. There's also a temporary exhibition space dedicated to other aspects of local culture and history, including early 20th-century photographs.

Cassis and the Calanques

Southeast of Marseille, the Massif des Calanques comprises close to 20 km of rocky limestone cliffs, deep inlets and translucent waters. Trails tangle through the wilderness, making the 4000-ha protected area best explored on foot or by boat.

It was here in 1985 that local boy Henri Cosquer discovered a stunning Ice Age cave, its walls decorated with hundreds of animal paintings (approximately 18,000 years old) and hand tracings, dating from around 27,000 years ago. Inaccessible to the public after three divers died trying to reach the cave in 1992, the entrance to the Grotte Cosquer lies at 37 m below sea level, between the Calanques of Sormiou and Morgiou.

Sandwiched between the Massif des Calanques and Cap Canaille, the latter boasting Europe's second highest sea cliff (Grand Tête, 394 m), the fishing village of Cassis has always been one of the southern French coast's most enchanting. Paul Signac painted the bay and headlands in 1899; Winston Churchill took art lessons here in 1920, bedding down at the Hotel Panorama (now the Camargo Foundation cultural centre, camargofoundation.org); and Virginia Woolf and friends spent long periods in Cassis during the 1930s, staying with her sister, Vanessa Bell.

Cassis, although certainly a lot busier, retains its appeal today. A medieval castle overlooks the town's harbour, which in turn is packed with traditional wooden fishing boats and pleasure craft. Kiosks selling sea urchins line the quays, opposite terraced restaurants and pavement cafés. North of town there are inland valleys of vineyards, renowned for their production of crisp white wine. Just a small percentage of this hand-harvested nectar is exported abroad, making the AOC area (just 196 ha) still the best place to sample it.

Artists in Provence

Provence's quality of light, combined with the intensity of its coastal and countryside colours, has long acted as an irresistible magnet for artists. Claude Monet may have dipped his toes off the shores off the French Riviera's shores in the late 1880s, but it was Vincent Van Gogh, Paul Gauguin and Paul Cézanne who truly earmarked Provence as a place of modern art pilgrimage.

Van Gogh arrived in the South of France in 1888. During the final two years of his life, the artist painted with a prolific intensity, turning his attention first to colourful Arles, depicting all its vigorous vibrancy. Like Impressionists before him, Van Gogh focused less on replicating what he saw; he instead channelled his creativity into use of colour and bold strokes, getting an image's personal effect onto canvas. These methods, and their results, were rarely embraced and frequently abhorred, emotions

that played on Van Gogh's fragile mental stability.

Fellow artist and friend Paul Gauguin soon joined Van Gogh in Arles for a period of two all-consuming months. Together they painted Van Gogh's yellow house, the Roman necropolis of Les Alyscamps (see page 84), the *Night Café* and each other. But they were both toeing their own abyss of depression, and frequently fought. One quarrel ended with Van Gogh taking a razor to his ear, landing him in the Hospital Hôtel-Dieu (now Espace Van Gogh, see page 83).

The Dutchman soon left both Gauguin and Arles in favour of the Monastère Saint-Paul de Mausole (see page 79) in Saint-Rémy-de-Provence. Staying at the monastery for over a year, Van Gogh created an incredible 143 paintings, including his famous *Starry Night* and *The Olive Trees*, before abandoning the south altogether.

was a chief player in the movement. Toulon suffered a double blow during the war: the French fleet was scuttled by its commanders before it could fall into German hands, then the town was blown to bits a few months later as Allied bombs hit Nazi positions in the bay. General Patch led the Allied army landings on the beaches of St-Tropez in 1944 and headed for Manosque and Gap, while General Vigier of the Free French Forces liberated Avignon and Arles.

Provence's post-war recovery was sluggish. Blocky, stocky buildings took the place of bombed-out residences in the larger cities. Yet more flats shot up to house the migrants from France's Asian, African and Maghreb ex-colonies, not least the *pieds noirs* from Algeria, a million of whom were left homeless after the French withdrawal in 1962. Both state and US Marshall Plan aid got the region moving again, but these handouts combined with a slow pace of success bred corruption, particularly along the coast. But with grand projects like the Paris-Marseille *autoroute* in 1970, the Paris-Aix TGV line in 2001 and, most recently, Marseille's revolutionary Euroméditerranée project, due for completion in 2013, things are looking up. The final foreign invasion – this time of sun-seeking tourists – has been heartily welcomed by the locals in most cases. After 27,000 years of action, they could probably do with a holiday too.