



## Wild beauty of France's watery Grand Canyon



The beach at Calanque d'En-Vau Michael Melford

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### To explore France's latest national park, on the ancient Calanques coastline, you'll have to leave the car behind

This coastline could be a Spielbergian fantasy on a Jurassic scale; fjord-like creeks stretching 20 miles from Marseille to Cassis. Cliffs tumble nearly 2,000ft into an azure sea.

Yet the South of France's most dramatic landscape is also its least visited. And thanks to new laws banning cars, jet skis and motorboats, its wild beauty will be protected for ever. Welcome to Parc National des Calanques, France's newest national park.

The word "calanque" translates as "inlet" in the local dialect, although that's a tame way to describe these monstrous creeks. They were created millions of years ago as ancient river valleys were flooded and fissured, then bleached white by the sun. Yet unlike Norway's fjords, only a Mediterranean maquis of wild olive and Aleppo pine can cling to these crumbling cliffs. Such topography has rendered the calanques near inaccessible until recent times. Get shipwrecked here and it could be a 1,000ft climb to safety. Yet this land where dolphins leap and eagles soar can now be explored in many different ways as local authorities have nurtured several tourism-targeted enterprises since the park opened last year. I set off from Cassis — the gateway to the new national park — on foot.

A welter of fragrant pathways weaves through the Parc National des Calanques. I plan a lazy loop from Cassis around the easternmost three creeks. First up is Calanque de Port-Miou, where the coastline's natural tricolour is immediately apparent: a blue lagoon is shielded by white cliffs, then crowned by a crest of evergreen pine. So unyielding is the local stone that it was quarried to build the base of the Statue of Liberty in New York.

The main public pathway through the park is the GR51. This grande randonnée route — known as the "Balconies of the Mediterranean" — is one of the pedestrian superhighways that crisscross France. This one links Marseille with Monte Carlo but still receives less foot traffic than a Cornish beach in midwinter.

The trail is tranquil. But just 100m off the beaten path it's Eden. Between Calanque de Port-Miou and Calanque de Port-Pin I find a half-mile peninsula of pristine Mediterranean all to myself. Midway along, a noisy blowhole puffs like a chatty oracle. At its tip, the peninsula bottlenecks to form yet another turquoise blue lagoon. I lie down and have a kip above the translucent sea,

my snores mixing with the coos of pigeons and the cries of gulls.

It's an hour-long hike to calanque number three. The walk offers a bittersweet taste of the remaining 19 creeks that stretch all the way to Marseille. The softness of the first two calanques was painted by Paul Signac; the sheerness of Calanque d'En-Vau could have been described by J.R.R. Tolkien. Imagine a Shangri-la of azure waters and ice-white beach and you'll be halfway there. This calanque looks as if a lighting bolt from Zeus has cleaved the earth in two, then filled the gap with sea of a Thai-tinted blue.

From 1,000ft below me the only noise I can hear comes from two sunbathers. The only movement is four rock climbers, belaying themselves 1,000ft to the clifftop. Surveying such a scene, it's a shock to think that there was any opposition to this new national park. Awestruck, I stumble back into Cassis to find out why.

Danielle Milon, the president of the national park, and mayor of Cassis, tells me that preserving more than 50,000 hectares of land and sea astride France's second city is a "delicate balance". After all, not everyone in the port of Marseille wants the park's 60 species of fish — which include brown grouper and John Dory — to be protected for posterity. But the local approach to park life is inclusive, not elitist. By protecting the beds of Neptune grass and red coral it's hoped that fish takes in the wider area will eventually rise, not fall.

In a bid to attract high-spending eco-conscious tourists, jet skis are banned, although sailing boats are welcomed. Similarly, visitors are encouraged to sample the local AOC Cassis wine, but are advised to follow the walking trail around all 12 local vineyards instead of driving it.

The benefits of joining the elite national park club are manifold. Boutique tourism in France's nine other state parks, which includes much of the Pyrenees and the island of Guadeloupe is booming. Moreover, the new park seems to be fostering a balanced lifestyle for locals, not just tourists. In Cassis, businesses thrive, from fishermen selling sea urchins on their boats, to the sailing co-operative that runs the coastal ferry tours. I board one of these frequent ferryboats for a final cruise around the park. It's a local tradition for anyone leaving Cassis by sea to wave at the crowds on the quay. Cassis waves back to our boat, the *Moby Dick III*, including couples in pavement cafés and a little boy fishing on the harbour wall.

Tourist boats leave every day at 10am from February to November to take in three (€15), five (€18), or eight (€21) calanques. I take the longer 90-minute cruise to Calanque de Morgiou, halfway to Marseille. As we cut through the sea our captain gives us a guided tour. On the right we pass Les Roches Blanches hotel. Here, Churchill painted while the Bloomsbury Set drank. Next is the Art Deco home of the drinks magnate Paul Ricard, built on the profits of Provençal pastis. Eyes strain coastward for the next visual treat: a naturist beach, before Calanque de Port-Miou.

The sheer cliffs of the calanques look even more majestic when seen from the sea. Calanque d'En-Vau is like a watery Grand Canyon that tourism forgot. Seagulls bob and cormorants skim, while under the translucent sea, schools of fish swim. I wonder if our petrol motor is in tune with the national park ethos. I'm told it will soon be replaced by a silent electric boat. The next few calanques rise to a neck-craning altitude. At more than 1,500ft the peaks are half the height of Snowdon and crash down at angles that would make a base-jumper weep. The Calanque de Sugiton collapses into a series of islands that can be snorkelled off, kayaked around or swum to.

Taxis and the occasional bus call at our final creek, the Calanque de Morgiou. Such transport opens up the possibility of a mammoth day hike through the entire national park. Safe in the knowledge that the calanques will be preserved for eternity, I think I'll leave it for another day.

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## Need to know

Tristan Rutherford was a guest of Railbookers (020-3327 0866, [railbookers.com](http://railbookers.com)) which has rail travel from London to Cassis, two nights' B&B at the Hotel Best Western La Rade, plus a return flight from Marseille on British Airways from £269pp.

Thanks to a stock of vintage villas and farmhouses, Cassis is awash with boutique B&Bs. All prices are for June.

## Where to stay in Cassis

### L'Avila

This five-room chic B&B is run by amiable Franco-Cuban couple Corinne and Humberto. There is a pool, parking and sea-view suites.

**Details** Doubles From €200 B&B (00 33 442 03 35 37, [lavila-cassis.com](http://lavila-cassis.com))

### Best Western La Rade

A ten-minute walk from the calanques, La Rade has a pool that overlooks the Mediterranean. Take in both sundeck and sea from the panoramic breakfast room.

**Details** Doubles from €189 room only (00 33 442 01 02 97, [bestwestern.fr](http://bestwestern.fr))

**Château de Cassis**

Enjoy designer accommodation in the medieval castle that overlooks Cassis. There's also a pool, sun terrace and a bird's-eye view over town.

**Details** Doubles From €290 B&B (00 33 442 01 63 20, [chateaudecassis.com](http://chateaudecassis.com))

**Maison 9**

Set in the vineyards behind Cassis is this ultra-luxe B&B inside a 19th-century farmhouse. The garden looks like it comes straight out of a Cézanne canvas.

**Details** Doubles from €265 B&B (00 33 442 08 35 86, [maison9.net](http://maison9.net))

**La Suite**

These three stylish suites by the sea belong on the pages of *World of Interiors* magazine. They share a heated pool, private terrace and panoramic views.

**Details** Doubles from €285 B&B (00 33 622 31 63 57, [lasuitecassis.com](http://lasuitecassis.com))

**France's six scenic national parks****Vanoise National Park**

Skiing, hiking and mountain biking are the main activities in the precipitous Parc National de la Vanoise ([parcnational-vanoise.fr](http://parcnational-vanoise.fr)). The 600km of trails include a six-day glacier tour and a section of the GR55 High Mountain trail. Keep eyes peeled for ibex, chamois and golden eagles.

**Where to stay** The Hôtel Le Commerce (00 33 479 05 20 98, [hotel-le-commerce.net](http://hotel-le-commerce.net)) in Modane offers inexpensive doubles, family rooms and demi-pension deals. It's just outside the national park, and across the road from the bus and rail stations.

Doubles cost from €72 room only per night.

**Port-Cros National Park**

Port-Cros ([portcrosparcnational.fr](http://portcrosparcnational.fr)) is a Mediterranean Eden. Its azure bays and 30km of hiking trails have been protected for 50 years. That means no cars, no fishing and no stress.

**Where to stay** Le Manoir (00 33 494 05 90 52, [hotel-lemanoirportcros.com](http://hotel-lemanoirportcros.com)) is a 1920s mansion with a eucalyptus garden and pool. Half board costs from €185pp.

**Pyrénées National Park**

The Parc National des Pyrénées ([parc-pyrenees.com](http://parc-pyrenees.com)) joins the Ordesa y Monte Perdido National Park on the other side of the Franco-Spanish border, nurturing more than 70 animal species over 600 sq km of protected mountains.

**Where to stay** The simple Châlet du Solour (00 33 562 97 09 20, [gite-dusoulor.com](http://gite-dusoulor.com)) in the park is at an altitude higher than Ben Nevis. Trails from the front door lead up the Val d'Azun. Picnic baskets are available. Rooms cost from €48pp half-board, including wine.

**Cévennes National Park**

The park ([cevennes-parcnational.fr](http://cevennes-parcnational.fr)) is an outdoor paradise for climbers, cavers and kayakers. It encompasses 250 villages, but is still among the most sparsely populated regions in France. There are 5,000 km of marked walking trails, plus routes for horses, bikes and scenic drives.

**Where to stay** Hôtel Bourgade (00 33 466 56 69 32, [restaurant-bourgade.fr](http://restaurant-bourgade.fr)) boasts a sunny breakfast terrace and nine elegant rooms, which cost from €59 on a room-only basis.

**Écrins National Park**

This Alpine park is hung with glaciers and icy trails, with countless summits rising to a lung-busting 3,000m. As Parc National des Écrins ([ecrins-parcnational.fr](http://ecrins-parcnational.fr)) tumbles in height, the fauna increases to include ibex, marmots, and eagles.

**Where to stay** The walled town of Briançon is Europe's highest town — and the gateway to the park. The age-old Hotel Edelweiss (00 33 492 21 02 94, [hotel-edelweiss-briancon.fr](http://hotel-edelweiss-briancon.fr)) sits in the centre under the pistes of Serre Chevalier. Double rooms cost from €62.

**Mercantour National Park**

The Parc National du Mercantour ([mercantour.eu](http://mercantour.eu)), 60 minutes by train from Nice, covers an Alpine area that used to belong to Italy and boasts several neolithic cave paintings. Sunny summers are the time to spot red deers, butterflies and wolves.

**Where to stay** The Hotel du Grand Capalet (00 33 493 02 19 77, [hotel-du-grand-capelet.fr](http://hotel-du-grand-capelet.fr)) has a sauna to soothe post-walk muscles. Double rooms cost from €78.

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