

You can drive from Cap Canaille
down to the pretty port of Cassis
– if you have the nerves for it



■ ON THE ROAD { Marseille }

Twist and shout

Driving the famous Route des Crêtes near Marseille is not for the faint-hearted, finds **Tristan Rutherford**

The utter homogenisation of the global automobile industry seems complete. It's 8am, and in the car park at Marseille Provence Airport, the regimented ranks of Peugeots, Citroens and Renaults stretch endlessly. Each appears designed by committee, distinguishable only by the differing size of bubble that envelopes each one.

But at the far end sits a steed from another era. A Fiat 124 Spider has been dropped off by Riviera Classic Car Hire, which delivers cars all over the South of France, offering an enticing range from a vintage Porsche 550 to a muscle-bound Ford Mustang. Rather conveniently, the A7 – the famed Autoroute du Soleil – runs south from the airport. It's a chance to open up the Spider on the fast French tarmac that winds through vineyards and fields of lavender. That's important. Because where I'm heading is a rollercoaster of a road called the Route des Crêtes (the Route of Crests), a serpentine stretch of sea-view panoramas that will test the Spider's every sinew.

A hair-raising asphalt corkscrew, the Route des Crêtes bridges the vertiginous clifftops between La Ciotat and Cassis, 25km from Marseille. Local tourist offices don't like to mention it lest this daredevil highway should become an attraction in its own right. The Spider doesn't care. It noses past the fishing boats of sleepy La Ciotat, uphill past La Poste. Access to the Route des Crêtes' starting point is adorned with a colour-coded warning to prevent high winds sweeping drivers off their feet: orange for 'caution

What we drove Fiat 124 Spider

Performance: Though it growls along the highway and bolts out of corners like a thoroughbred, this stately racer is neither nippy nor nimble. But it is a lot of fun

Engine: The most powerful of the regular 124s has a 1.75l engine offering 116hp.

A special Volumex edition produced in 1984 blasts out 133hp

Top speed: A 1970s Abarth Rally version of the Spider could top 190km/h. Our vintage model prefers to cruise at 120km/h

Price: €450 for three-day rental
rivieraclassiccarhire.com





required', red for 'access only between 6am and 11am', and black for 'road closed'. The barrier says red and my watch says 10am. With a raucous snort the Spider gallops forward beyond the point of no return.

The allure of the Route des Crêtes is immediate. The road's official name is the D141, a boring moniker for a route that spirals uphill through groves of holm oak and pine. A maquis scent assaults the cabriolet, mingling with rosemary, heather, lavender and thyme roasting in the morning sun. To the north is the red earth of rural Provence. To the south are silver limestone cliffs that stand before an azure sea. The relentless uphill furrows pivot the Spider like a boxer taking constant punches left and right. Seen from above, the road is like an impossible zigzag scrawled by a devilish child across a rocky redoubt.

It's a good job I'm in the Spider. Some stretches of

“The sea flashes on both sides of the raised road. It's like driving in a video game where you only have one life”

tarmac incline 30 degrees, but luckily this is a car of racing calibre. The open-top body was styled back in the 1960s by Tom Tjaarda, a Detroit-born petrolhead who designed supercars until he was in his seventies. The 1970s' De Tomaso Pantera, the 1980s' Aston Martin Lagonda and the noughties' Spyker Sport all bear his trademark attacking lines.

Midway through the route is big dipper territory. Elevated switchbacks are so frequent that you can gaze ahead at the next four corners ribboning into the distance. The sea flashes on both sides of the raised road. It's like driving in a video game where you only have one life. The headiest part of the road is Cap Canaille at a height of 394m. This peak is marked by a belvedere where the brave can park up and stroll over to take in the view of France's highest sea cliff. The vista below is dizzying. Not least because, just like on the Route des Crêtes, there isn't a safety barrier in sight.

Fortunately, Cassis heaves into view as the route barrels downhill. The Spider and I spin seaward like a bullet. The town's famed white wine vineyards frame the route into the chi-chi fishing port. After that rollercoaster ride there's definitely a glass of AOC Cassis with my name on it.

ot-cassis.com

FLY TO MARSEILLE TWICE DAILY



Scents of maquis – heather, lavender and rosemary – fill the air along the route



Sleep

La Maison d'Odette, 2 Rue Albert et Georges Arnoux, La Ciotat lamaisondodette.fr

Managed with love, La Maison d'Odette sits in the historic heart of La Ciotat, blending traditional tomette tile floors with granny-chic décor and modernist touches. The €5 breakfast is served at the cute Café de l'Horloge across the street. Doubles from €85.