

Provence & Côte d'Azur

Overview

From sun-dappled squares in Provence villages to the glamorous Riviera bustle of Cannes and Nice, from lavender field to twinkling shoreline, the regions of Provence and Côte d'Azur are a feast for all the senses – for most visitors, the very essence of “The South of France”. Little wonder that the A6 motorway that brings them south from Lyon is called the “Autoroute du Soleil”. The area’s amazing light and scenery has lured artists for centuries, while the year-round warmth brings beach lovers and the food, drink and easy lifestyle attract those seeking their own piece of a “Year in Provence”. From city breaks in Nice and Aix-en-Provence to beach holidays in Juan-les-Pins, there is something to tempt everyone.

Main cities and towns

Nice is the most popular transport hub for those arriving by plane (with Toulon-Hyères and Marseille – that vibrant melting pot of cultures – increasingly served by flights from the UK) and this cosmopolitan city caters for all tastes. With its great restaurants, markets, art galleries and glorious Promenade des Anglais, it’s the dream weekend break destination. To the east lie Monaco and Menton, providing yet more glamour and historical interest, while heading west you will find the gorgeous towns of Orange, Avignon, Arles and Aix-en-Provence, each offering compelling histories, rich artistic traditions (some with excellent festivals) and splendid architecture. Smaller towns of considerable charm to check out include Grasse, St-Rémy de Provence, Antibes and Vence.

Places to visit

To this day, the Roman influences on Provence remain a powerful draw, with the impressive arenas in Arles and Orange especially unmissable. For culture vultures, meanwhile, there is much to take in. Nice, Antibes and Aix-en-Provence all shine a light on the celebrated artists that lived there (Matisse, Picasso and Cézanne), while in antique-mad Isle-sur-la-Sorgue you could sniff out your own bargain masterpiece. In Grasse you can explore the world of perfume and even create your own scent at one of the big-name perfumeries. For sheer spectacle head to the Camargue, home to black bulls and white horses and don’t miss the beautiful calanques, small inlets on Marseilles’s rocky coastline – you might even find a secluded beach on which to soak up the sun.

Things to do and see

Anyone getting out and about with a sense of purpose will find plenty of reward. With some of France’s most stunning countryside and parkland, you could be walking the marked trails in the Alpes de Haute-Provence or taking in lovely old villages like Sospel in the Alpes-Maritimes. Climbers and lovers of white-water thrills should head for the Verdon gorges, while horse riding, mountain biking, fishing, golf and even hot-air ballooning are available throughout the region. On a more sedate note, you could head to one of the region’s 11 Thalassotherapy centres for a water-based wind-down.

Food and drink

When it comes to local produce, sunshine creates flavour here like in no other part of France, from the ripe olives that end up in sauces and salads to the courgettes, aubergines and juicy tomatoes that form Provence's celebrated ratatouille. Meat-eaters will love the lamb from Sisteron, often roasted with famous herbes de Provence, while for fish fans there is a wealth of choice. One look at Marseille's vibrant Quai des Belges port tells you that the daily catch is varied and plentiful, and the city is the only place in which to enjoy a truly authentic bouillabaisse (fish stew). Take the Lavender route in parts of the Vaucluse and you will see the ingenious uses of the purple flower in honey, while Menton's annual Lemon Festival points to a penchant for all things citrus. As for wine, try the dry, fruity rosés of Les Côtes de Provence.

Family attractions

Aside from the outdoor activities such as canoeing and climbing that the Verdon Gorge offers, there are plenty of theme parks to tempt youngsters. Aqualand near Fréjus has an array of swimming pools and water slides for all ages, while for a day out with more bite, head to the Crocodile Farm north of Orange. The OK Corral in Cuges-les-Pins provides Wild West fun in the form of rodeo and rides, while for a more genteel sojourn, try a spot of bird watching at the Pont de Gau Ornithological Park in the Camargue.