

Traveller

SUNDAY AGE

SUNDAY, JUNE 8, 2025

FORGOTTEN FRANCE

Sidestep the crowds
in the world's
most-visited country

HAPPY PLACE | The original Disneyland turns 70
SLURPS UP | Sampling Taiwan's national dish

COVER STORY

Beyond Provence



If you rent a car and cut inland from the tourist-heaving Cote d'Azur north-west in the direction of well-known Avignon, you're in for a mighty surprise.

I did just that recently and for 200 kilometres drove through a region of wild scenery, the Verdon Gorge and tiny towns, until I was coughed up in Luberon, where sleepy villages slumped against a quilt of olive groves and sunflower fields backed by orangey hills.

Luberon is a small region of Provence, the busiest French tourist region outside Paris, yet it sits happily beyond tour groups, river cruisers and Riviera jet-setters.

Of course, it isn't entirely ignored, which is a good thing. I stay at Hotel Coquillade Provence, which shows that getting over mainstream horizons doesn't mean sacrificing style, a swimming pool and fine dining.

Yet I squint over a valley striped with vineyards and punctuated with spindly cypress trees that seem a thousand kilometres from care. The region's roads are uncluttered, which makes this a top walking and cycling destination.

Luberon is the whirl of bicycle wheels, the chirping of cicadas and gurgle of poured wine as I tuck into smoked duck breast with white asparagus. The cackle of tour groups and hen's parties is far beyond earshot.

France is the world's most-visited country, with international tourist arrivals somewhere between 90 and 100 million,



Don't battle the hordes in the world's most-visited country. Try these overlooked French idylls. By Brian Johnston

depending on who produces the statistics. That's a lot of people.

But have you heard of Luberon? Or Lozere, France's least-populated department? And yes, you've heard of Champagne and Normandy, and may have visited, but few stray beyond their narrow tourist trails.

Other places such as Corsica are visited mostly by French tourists. Ile-de-France, the compact region that includes Paris, has 165,660 hotel rooms, while the whole of Corsica has just 12,676.

Even in the world's most tourist-busy nation you'll find towns, national parks and whole regions that get far fewer visitors than more famous counterparts. Some might be crowded with in-the-know Europeans over certain seasons but go well under the radar of Australians.

For those who think they've done France, here's a taster of its relatively less-visited but deserving regions.

Get beyond the obvious and France rewards you.

LUBERON

Where A small, mountainous region of southern France just east of Avignon and north of Aix-en-Provence, yet over the horizon from big-name Provence sights and the main Rhone river tourist corridor.

Why we love it This is a corner of Provence without the van Gogh tea towels and lavender sachets, where you can abandon kitsch for a more rugged holiday beyond the crowds. Luberon's rugged uplands and valleys feature perched villages, old monasteries, olive groves, vineyards and lavender fields. It's also a top cycling and hiking destination.

Don't miss Gordes and Bonnieux are top towns but Saignon is a "secret" alternative for its medieval architecture and magnificent outlooks. Luberon's castles are grimly functional and mostly ruined but Chateau de Lourmarin has historic rooms, flower-dotted terraces and a gorgeous setting. The yellow-signed, three-hour return walk between Bonnieux and Lacoste is lovely.

Essentials July is peak lavender season. Stay at Hotel Coquillade Provence, which has a spa and excellent dining and overlooks vineyards and Luberon Regional Nature Park. It's designed to resemble one of Luberon's medieval villages. See destinationluberon.com

DORDOGNE VALLEY

Where The Dordogne river joins the Gironde estuary near Bordeaux. The further inland and east you travel along it, the wilder it gets, until it flows through deep gorges. Popular with summering Brits and Germans but not well-known to Australians.

Why we love it The scenery is utterly delightful. The river snakes through lush countryside framed in limestone cliffs and overlooked by medieval villages and brooding castles. Add ancient history, venerable market towns and great food – especially truffles – and you have the perfect distillation of France.

Don't miss Lively market town Libourne has quaint 16th-century townhouses and a Gothic church, Bergerac an impressive medieval centre topped by a dramatic castle, and Rocamadour is a cliff-perched pilgrim town. Perigueux and Cahors are other ancient towns, and almost every village is gorgeous. The Lascaux caves house fabulous Cro-Magnon paintings estimated at being about 15,000 to 20,000 years old.