



Gastronomic Provence

La cuisine du soleil, history and art in the South of France

1–8 May 2025 (ML 710)

£4,710 • 8 days

Speaker: Victoria Daskal

Sample the most abundant, colourful and delicious larder in France.

The dining experience ranges from street food to the 2-Michelin-starred 'Flaveur' in Nice.

The wines are equally compelling, among them the simple Provençal *rosé* and prestigious Châteauneuf-du-Pape.

Journey from the Mediterranean coast to the Rhône valley; stay in Nice and Avignon.

Provence is the France of our imagination, where the sun always shines, the food tastes more vivid than anywhere else, and the wine is rich and plentiful. It is the landscape of a painting by Paul Cézanne or the words of a novel by Marcel Pagnol; it is that languid dreamy place where pastis is drunk in the shade of plane trees, where cypresses bend with the force of the mistral, and where the sun, that huge, throbbing yellow orb that Vincent van Gogh painted so intensely, shines some three hundred days of the year from a deep azure sky.

From the rugged uplands of Les Alpilles to the glistening sea of the Côte d'Azur; from the windswept Camargue to the stony wine hills of Châteauneuf-du-Pape; and from Nice to Avignon – our two bases for this tour – Provence is a region of great contrasts, artistically, historically and gastronomically. What unites it above all is a sense of warmth, generosity and abundance.

The gastronomy of Provence is truly cuisine of the sun. Stroll through markets in Nice, Aigues-Mortes or Avignon, and you are assaulted with colourful visions and scents: glossy, plump aubergines, piles of fine haricots verts, and at least a dozen types of lettuce laid out in the morning light.

Such seasonal abundance has traditionally required preserving methods for leaner times. Fish may be salted, pork transformed into charcuterie, milk from the goats that graze on the soft-leaved scrubland made into discs of cheese, sometimes covered in fines herbes de Provence. And the seasonal glut of fruits for which Provence is so famous is still, in a few traditional places only, transformed by slow poaching in sugar syrup into fruits confits that are virtually works of art in themselves.



Avignon, cathedral, lithograph c. 1850.

Both land and sea yield so many good things and this is reflected in a generous cuisine that is rarely over-complicated. Fishing villages along the fabled Côte d'Azur are the source of an extraordinary Mediterranean catch, while typical inland dishes reflect the harsher terrain of Provence, where meat is scarce and everything must be utilised. La gardiane is a rich stew made from the meat of bulls raised on the Camargue and the petits farcis of Nice stretch out fresh vegetables with delicious morsels of ground meat.

A discovery of the wines of Provence is an equally important part of our pursuit. The pretty, pale rosés are a delightful theme, but there are also less frequently encountered vintages to slake the thirst; Cassis, a forceful white from vineyards above the eponymous fishing village, is the perfect accompaniment to the equally full-flavoured bouillabaisse.

For the Romans, this corner of France, the province of Gallia Narbonensis, was one of the most important and strategic in the Empire. The Aurelian Way leading from Rome to Arles left notable Roman remains; however, perhaps the greatest Roman legacy is found not in bricks and mortar, but in the values of Roman civilisation, which remained after the fall of the Empire and had a profound effect on present-day Provençal attitudes to food, wine, and easy good living.

Itinerary

Day 1: Nice. Fly at c. 12.15pm from London Heathrow to Nice (British Airways). An introductory talk precedes dinner near the hotel. First of four nights in Nice.

Day 2: Nice. A guided food walk through Nice is an opportunity to sample local delicacies such as socca, chickpea batter baked in a ferociously hot oven, and pissaladière, a sort of Provençal pizza. In the urban appellation of Bellet, in the steep wine hills above the city, taste a rare wine produced in the tiniest quantities. Dinner is at two Michelin-starred Flaveur. The chefs, brothers Mickaël and Gaël Tourteaux, who earned their second star in 2018, create characterful, delicate dishes. Second of three nights in Nice.

Day 3: St-Paul-de-Vence, Vence. Mary Lynn Riley, MRT lecturer, resident of the Côte d'Azur and specialist in modern art joins the tour today. Drive first to the Maeght Foundation, renowned for its collections (Picasso, Hepworth, Miró, Arp, Giacometti, but not all works are shown at once) and for its architecture and setting. Lunch is at La Colombe d'Or in St-Paul-de-Vence, long famous for the artistic crowd that it attracts as well as its fresh regional cuisine. In the afternoon visit the Chapelle du Rosaire, a Dominican chapel designed by Matisse.

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continued

Day 4: Cannes, Île Saint-Honorat. The Marché Forville in Cannes is a vast covered market whose colourful stalls are laden with seasonal fruits and vegetables, flowers, locally caught seafood, cheese and charcuterie. From Cannes take a short ferry to the Île Saint-Honorat. On this small island is the Abbaye de Lérins, a Cistercian monastery with a small community of monks who cultivate the surrounding vineyards. We walk through the vineyards, have a wine tasting and picnic lunch before returning to Nice.

Day 5: Cassis, Avignon. An early departure from Nice for the pretty port of Cassis. Accessible only by boat, visit the hidden bays of the calanques that are home to the bony rock fish traditionally thrown into the fisherman's pot. Afterwards, overlooking the water, feast on that amazing festival of the sea, la bouillabaisse. An evening wine tasting at the hotel in Avignon (situated in a former 16th-century residence) celebrates the wines of the Rhône, a mighty river of wine since the times of the Greeks and Romans. First of three nights in Avignon.

Day 6: Pont du Gard, Rhône Valley, Les Alpilles. Morning visit to the Pont du Gard aqueduct, an astonishing feat of Roman engineering. The area's Roman heritage is celebrated at Mas des Tourelles, a winery built on the site of a Gallo-Roman wine cellar where ancient wine-making techniques are preserved. Tasting and picnic lunch at a nearby family-run winery in the Costières de Nîmes. Return to Avignon via an olive oil producer in the heart of the Alpilles; the mill, dating to the 12th century, has been run by the same family for 10 generations. Dinner at Restaurant Sevin (formerly Christian Étienne). Chef Guilhem Sevin, who worked with Étienne for nearly two decades before taking over the restaurant in 2016, creates modern menus in a striking historical setting in the shadow of the Palais des Papes.

Day 7: Aigues-Mortes, Avignon. Drive through the Camargue, a windswept landscape home to wild horses, and where salt has been harvested from the flats for thousands of years. Lunch is within the medieval city walls of Aigues-Mortes. Return to Avignon for some free time before a final dinner at one-Michelin-starred La Vieille Fontaine within the hotel. Chef Pascal Auger creates refined, beautiful dishes paying particular attention to seasonality.

Day 8: Avignon. Late morning departure from Avignon for Marseille airport. Fly to London Heathrow arriving c. 4.00pm.

Practicalities

Price. Two sharing, superior room in Nice: £4,710 or £4,490 without flights. **Two sharing, superior sea view room in Nice:** £5,010 or £4,790 without flights. **Single occupancy, superior room in Nice:** £5,650 or £5,430 without flights. **Single occupancy, superior sea view room in Nice:** £6,200 or £5,980 without flights.

Included: flights (Euro Traveller) with British Airways (Airbus 320); travel by private coach for airport transfers and excursions; boat travel as indicated in the itinerary; hotel accommodation; breakfasts, 6 lunches (including 2 picnics) and 4 dinners with wine, water and coffee; all wine and food tastings; all admissions; all tips; all taxes; the services of the lecturer and tour manager.

Accommodation. Hotel La Pérouse, Nice (hotel-la-perouse.com): 4-star hotel partially built into the cliff and overlooking the Promenade des Anglais. Rooms are furnished in modern Provençal style. **Hôtel d'Europe, Avignon** (heurope.com): central 5-star hotel in a former 16th-century residence close to the river Rhône with a pleasant courtyard.

How strenuous? There is a lot of walking and standing on this tour (some of it over uneven ground), and it would not be suitable for anyone who has difficulties with everyday walking or stair-climbing. Some days involve a lot of driving.

Group size: between 10 and 22 participants.