



IMAGE © JENNIFER LADONNE, GIGONDAS

The pretty village of Gigondas, in the southern Rhône Valley, has given its name to an Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée

Road Trip through the **RHÔNE VALLEY**

The Rhône Valley is a place of remarkable beauty and astonishing diversity, a patchwork landscape woven together by a common thread: its legendary wines. **Jennifer Ladonne** gets a taste of the area between Lyon and Avignon »

Giving oneself just a week to cover the Rhône Valley – or at least the incredibly varied 140-mile stretch between Lyon and Avignon – is potentially a fool’s errand. My ideal week off here would be to hunker down in a village and decide each morning where to explore. So covering this entire area, which spans seven départements and encompasses must-see sites dating from prehistory to the present day, in only seven days, would leave no time for wandering.

I decided to focus on the Drôme, the Ardèche and the Vaucluse, all reliably gorgeous and packed with things to do and places to see. And, as this is one of France’s great wine regions, it made sense to make wine a guiding theme, with side visits to some far-flung spots I’d never seen, like the city of Valence, Chauvet Cave and a secluded eco-resort near Châteauneuf-du-Pape with cabins on a lake (literally). So, with a crazy itinerary in hand, I set off on my adventure.

With all there is to see here, the Rhône Valley is a place where you can speed up or slow down. Distances are short. You can motor quickly from town to town via the A7 *autoroute* or the mythical *route du Soleil*, the N7, which every July for almost a century was clogged with hordes of French holidaymakers on their way south to the coast. Or you can choose a region, or

“AS THE ANCIENT CROSSROADS FOR THE COUNTRY’S GREAT WINES AND CUISINES, LYON IS WHERE THE GRAND FRENCH TRADITIONS TOOK ROOT”

theme – wine and food, Roman ruins, vineyard hikes or biking, for example – and follow narrow country lanes through sleepy perched villages, stopping at your leisure to explore ramparts, a church, a château or a provincial market to sample the local fare.

CULINARY RESURGENCE

Paris may now own the distinction of ‘gastronomic capital of France’, but Lyon, as the ancient crossroads for the country’s great wines and cuisines, is where the grand French traditions took root. Lyon still nurtures its famous *bouchons* – family-owned establishments, often in a home and typically headed by women, where the city’s silk workers could get a hearty, reasonably priced meal, washed down with the local *vin de Bourgogne*. Nowadays, dining here is an exuberant adventure, as Lyon emerges from Paris’s shadow in a scintillating culinary resurgence fuelled by passionate young chefs. The new restaurants are often casual and laid-back, with the emphasis placed squarely on the food. Dinner at Les Apothicaires is the perfect case in point. Here, husband and wife team Ludovic and Tabata Mey create an eight-course “liberated and sincere” menu that plays with textures,



Clockwise from main image: Lyon is enjoying a resurgence as a gastronomic destination; the belfry of Séguret and its one-handed clock; a vineyard tour links the region together well; chocolate and wine at Cave de Tain; banners adorn many of the hillsides here; (inset) Ludovic and Tabata Mey

temperatures and flavour pairings: the crunch of rose petals and sea salt on beetroot, or white beans paired with smoked eel and velvety cubes of bone marrow and sparks of lemon thyme.

Many of Lyon’s chefs are not native-born but were looking for a less stressful lifestyle than they had in Paris. At Le Kitchen Café, you’ll find Swedish chef Connie Zagora and her pastry chef husband Laurent Ozan, who worked in top kitchens in Paris, Bordeaux and Arles before settling in Lyon. “We were looking for a nice place to live,” they told me. “Lyon is calm, beautiful, and has an airport nearby.” What’s more, “In the last three to five years, Lyon has become one of the most interesting cities for gastronomy”. The restaurant’s gourmet lunch is wildly popular, so you must book ahead.

HILLSIDE VINEYARDS

The steep hillside vineyards bordering the tiny town of Tain-l’Hermitage, on the banks of the Rhône, an hour’s train ride from Lyon, are emblazoned with banners for Michel Chapoutier, Paul Jaboulet and other Côtes du Rhône giants.

A household name in France, Chapoutier is a seventh-generation winemaker whose vineyards cover

most of the Rhône Valley, as well as the great Côtes du Rhône appellations lining both sides of the river – Côte-Rôtie, Condrieu, Saint-Joseph, Hermitage, Crozes-Hermitage, Saint-Péray. He is also a pioneer of biodynamic wines, an ecologically-sound method of cultivation that abstains from chemicals and encourages a healthy ecosystem.

Chapoutier is a major presence in Tain-l’Hermitage, with a tasting room and wine boutique and Le Marius Bistro, a fine place for lunch or dinner after your *dégustation*, all on the main street, a few minutes’ walk from the train station. Tastings are always private and free of charge for up to five people, but you can also participate in one of several workshops offered, pairing wine and food or focusing on Chapoutier’s exclusive *grands vins*.

The wine cooperative Cave de Tain, whose wines are vying with those of the top producers, will take you on a tour of their winery with explanations of the wines and winemaking process and a tasting afterwards. The sprawling boutique is an excellent place to stock up on wines, which can be shipped anywhere.

Wine and chocolate tastings are on offer at all the major houses, as Tain is also the home of Valrhona chocolate (‘Val’ as in valley, ‘rhona’ as in Rhône), >>

Le Pont d'Arc is a natural formation in the Gorges d'Ardeche, a short distance from the Chauvet Cave.

IMAGE © L. CLARA



“FROM CHAUVET II, YOU CAN VISIT NEARBY PONT D'ARC, A NATURAL BRIDGE, AND ENJOY LUNCH AT THE AUBERGE LA FARIGOULE”

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Clockwise from this image: Exploring Valence's picturesque side streets is a must; be sure to sample Anne-Sophie Pic's Michelin-starred fare on your next visit; panoramic view of Valence

which was founded here in 1922. The globally celebrated brand is France's number-one premium chocolate and is the one used by most French pastry chefs and chocolatiers.

A chocolate lover's dream, the Cité du Chocolat excels in interactive activities for adults and kids to discover what chocolate is all about: where it comes from and how to taste and appreciate it – with all the free samples you can eat. Kids and parents can participate in hands-on workshops on chocolate and pastry-making and afterwards dine in the café (on a savoury and sweet all-chocolate menu), and then go crazy in the boutique.

CELEBRITY CHEF

Say "Valence" to a French person and they'll invariably reply, "Anne-Sophie Pic". Such is the status of this daughter of the Rhône, the only woman in France to hold three Michelin stars and the head of an ever-growing culinary empire. Though Pic now has restaurants in Lausanne, Paris and London, she cooks every night in the kitchen of her eponymous Valence restaurant, a rarity for a celebrity chef, and a major reason to go.

Pic's plush gastronomic restaurant, luxury hotel and suave gourmet bistro reside together on an unalluring street in central Valence. This is the restaurant's historic address; it was opened here by her grandfather in 1936, when the street was on the old N7, so holidaymakers could easily stop in on their way south. Don't be alarmed by the entrance: to walk through these doors is to enter a parallel universe, complete with luxuriant gardens and elegant hushed rooms that speak of Pic's 90-year-old legacy as the daughter and granddaughter of legendary chefs. A short way down the street you'll find Pic's gourmet *épicerie* and cooking school, Scook, which offers sophisticated wine and food tastings and classes for all cooking levels.

Pic is not the only gastronomic reason to head to Valence. I had one of the best meals of my trip at Flaveurs, where Michelin-starred chef Baptiste Poinot is creating dishes of extraordinary subtlety and sophistication. Poinot's intimate restaurant is set >>



WHAT TO SEE IN AN AFTERNOON IN AVIGNON

It is best known for its bridge, but I never tire of Avignon, as few small cities in France are as generously endowed.

Encircled by the best-preserved ramparts in France and crowned by the **Palais des Papes**, home of the 14th-century French popes, it's an all-around impressive sight.

Add to that a handful of world-class museums, the incomparable Avignon Theatre Festival and an enviable foodie scene and, well... You see what I mean.

Wine lovers should head straight to the **Carré du Palais**, where all the great Rhône Valley appellations are available by the bottle

or the glass, paired with meals or delicious small plates of cheese or charcuterie.

A few weeks of dining out would not exhaust the gastronomic options here and the overflowing **Halles d'Avignon** central food market would tempt anyone to rent a farmhouse and dine *à la maison*.

But with only one afternoon to spend here, I must content myself with a visit to the **Collection Lambert**, one of my very favourite contemporary art centres in France, and a walk through the golden-hued old town in the late afternoon light before heading to the train station.



The medieval Pont d'Avignon now extends only halfway across the Rhône. It is chiefly famous for having people dancing on it in a circle



Clockwise from top left: The Château de Grignan, one of the finest in France; mellow Nyons olives; Montélimar nougat; the world's oldest known prehistoric art at the Chauvet Cave



in Valence's medieval old town. This is an area well worth an afternoon's exploration for its cobbled streets lined with Renaissance and medieval buildings, leafy, café-strewn square and market (and local farmers' market on Tuesday evenings); not to mention the newly-renovated museum offering a fine Roman collection and 360-degree views of the Rhône Valley from its upper terraces.

About 30 miles south of Valence, Montélimar, the land of the famous almond-and-pistachio-laden nougat (where you can stop for an hour or two to visit Arnaud Soubeyran's museum, factory, boutique and café), is called the northern doorway to Provence. The Drôme Provençale, just above Provence's Vaucluse département, has one of France's loveliest landscapes, dotted with sleepy medieval villages, vineyards and the foothills of the Alps to the east.

If you have time for just one village in the Drôme, make it Grignan, whose creamy white buildings rise like an apparition above rolling vineyards and lavender fields that explode with colour in late June and July. The Château de Grignan, the beautifully restored 17th-century home of the daughter of Madame de Sévigné, the renowned letter writer, tops the village. Another excellent reason for stopping – and staying – is Le Clair de la Plume, one of the area's great 'hotels of charm', with an outdoor eco-pool, a superb Michelin-starred table and the best breakfast to be had

IMAGES © L. CLARA / SHUTTERSTOCK

“IF YOU HAVE TIME FOR JUST ONE VILLAGE IN THE DRÔME, MAKE IT GRIGNAN, WHOSE CREAMY WHITE BUILDINGS RISE LIKE AN APPARITION”

anywhere. Just a bit further inland, the town of Nyons, which is chiefly famous for its deliciously mellow black olives, offers a vibrant farmers' market and the Vignolis cooperative, where you'll find all the Rhône's Grignan-les-Adhémar appellations: Vinsobres, Visan, Suze-la-Rousse and the sparkling Clairette de Die – plus gourmet olive oils and other local specialities.

PREHISTORIC PAINTINGS

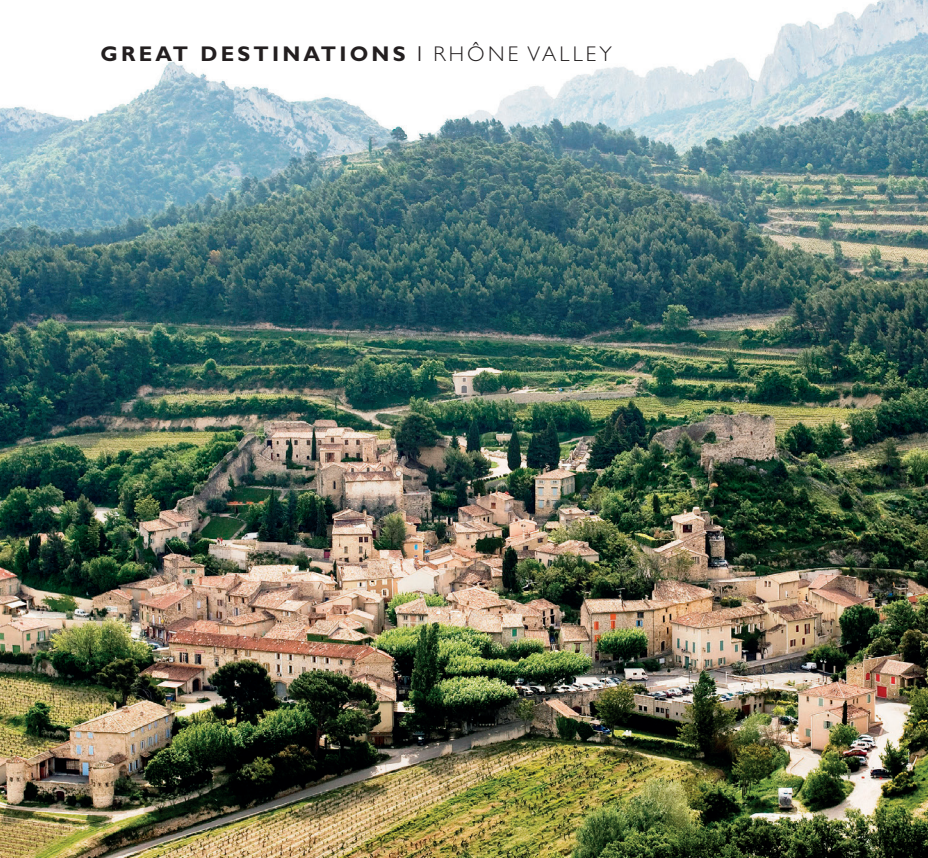
In 1994, three speleologists discovered a cave harbouring prehistoric paintings that date back 32,000 years, making these the oldest in the world. Having learned the lessons of Lascaux, which suffered irreversible damage during its 15 years open to the public, Chauvet, which is named after its principal discoverer Jean-Marie Chauvet, was immediately sealed off to all but a handful of scientists and scholars, who are allowed limited access twice a year. It took more than a decade to create Chauvet II, which also benefited from the lessons of Lascaux.

The Caverne du Pont-d'Arc's wooded grounds were designed to leave the lightest footprint possible on the natural landscape. Once you descend into Chauvet II's dark interiors it's easy to forget that this is a facsimile, as the remarkably expressive paintings come vividly to life under lighting meant to recreate the flickering torchlight used by the original artists. It is a moving experience, though the cave itself poses more questions than anyone will ever answer. (Werner Herzog, the only filmmaker to gain a few hours' access to the cave, made the documentary *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* – useful viewing before you make your visit.)

From Chauvet II you can visit nearby Pont d'Arc, a natural bridge, and enjoy lunch at the Auberge La Farigoule (be sure to try a red wine and chestnut aperitif and, if you happen by in the winter months, the all-truffle menu, including an omelette, salad and truffle-flecked ice cream). For your perched village fix, 12th-century Saint-Montan is a lovely short drive away through scrubby *garrigue*.

Seventh-generation winemaker Raphaël Pommier and his American wife, Rachel, play up the Chauvet theme with tastings of their award-winning organic wines in a soaring cave near their vineyard in Bourg-Saint-Andéol. Raphaël is an engaging host and raconteur; his passion for the wines and *terroir* is utterly contagious. Raphaël and Rachel offer a range of local experiences for individuals and families at the vineyard, Notre Dame de Cousignac, plus a restaurant and an adorable B&B. Butting up against the Drôme, across the Rhône from the Ardèche, »

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Top and above: Aerial view of the charming and sophisticated village of Gigondas; alternative accommodation at the eco-friendly resort of Coucoo Grands Cépages

Provence's Vaucluse is another département that demands exploration, beginning with Vaison-la-Romaine, a town as famous for its elegant Roman bridge and ruins as for its Tuesday morning market, one of the region's largest.

Across the jagged Dentelles de Montmirail mountain range begins another, more arid, microclimate whose limestone soils and abundant sunshine produce the gorgeous Grenache-based reds of Gigondas and the sweet Beauges-de-Venise nectars.

On a four-wheel-drive tour of the terrain above Beauges-de-Venise, I am reminded once again of why this particular part of Provence grabs my heart: a cloudless, electric-blue sky against the bleached mountains and ruddy gold earth, the leafless black grapevines of late March skewering up with all the fervent life of a Van Gogh painting.

Expertly manoeuvring on this craggy, steep terrain, Claude Chabran, President of the Beauges-de-Venise cooperative Rhonéa (a great place to taste and buy local wines and other produce), explained how this rocky, upside-down terrain is like no other in the Rhône Valley: "Under the pressure of sediments below, the limestone slabs pushed up vertically, creating the Dentelles. The sediments that were below rose to the surface and the sediments on the surface are now deep. This is the specificity of the region."

DISTINCT CHARACTER

To highlight the uniqueness of each *terroir* and microclimate – of which there are dozens in the Rhône Valley, varying by such precise factors as elevation, exposure, angle of slope, etc. – at Rhonéa you can taste the distinct character of three red Beauges-de-Venise from side-by-side *terroirs*; and, of course, the golden, perfumed Beauges-de-Venise, a sweet fortified wine made from the Muscat grape, one of the oldest Rhône Valley varietals, beloved of the medieval French popes. A 15-minute drive takes me to the village of Gigondas,

a rare mix of charm and sophistication, mostly bestowed by its art gallery and perched tasting room in a medieval stone building, and its superb gastronomic restaurant, L'Oustalet, which won its first Michelin star in February. At an all-truffle lunch with local winemaker Pierre Amadiou, we had the great fortune to sample chef Laurent Deconinck's exquisite Mediterranean cuisine, including the first asparagus of the season, followed by a sublime dish of melt-in-your-mouth veal and sweetbreads, all complemented by Amadiou's superb Gigondas reds, whites and rosés.

Gigondas's lovely shaded square, which embraces L'Oustalet's outdoor terrace, is the perfect spot to while away an afternoon. The village is also an ideal starting or stopping point for a hike or bike ride along the many vineyard trails, and the town's central spring provides cool, drinkable water.

It's worthwhile stopping in at Châteauneuf-du-Pape, about 15 miles away, if only for a tasting at one of the many estates (the highly-respected Domaine Pierre Usseglio, right in town, is a good choice) as well as the Vinadea boutique, where you can taste and purchase

"ON A TOUR OF THE TERRAIN ABOVE BEAUGES-DE-VEISE, I AM REMINDED OF WHY THIS PARTICULAR PART OF PROVENCE GRABS MY HEART"

the region's top appellations. Maison Brotte, the wine museum, is also worth a visit for all you need to know about Côtes du Rhône wines.

Arriving at Coucoo Grands Cépages at 6pm was both a blessing (hallelujah, I found it!) and a curse, once I took in the beauty of the place and realised I had about four waking hours to spend there.

Set back off a residential road just outside Châteauneuf-du-Pape, a code gets you through a motorised gate leading to a parking lot where you leave your car and forget about it for however long you have the pleasure of staying.

The resort's 15 secluded, eco-friendly *cabanes*, designed for couples or families, are clustered around a lake – two or three are actually on the water, reached by a walkway or boat – and surrounded by tall pampas grass and trees, so you barely see your neighbours. The lake is ringed by a gravel road, and hiking trails take you through the *garrigue* terrain or to the ozone swimming pool. Breakfast is included in the price and all meals (healthy, Provençal or gourmet; with or without wine) are brought directly to your *cabane* by golf cart at your appointed hour.

All the *cabanes* are beautifully designed to best accommodate the Mediterranean climate and offer either a hot tub or sauna. Relaxing on my terrace, watching the sunset over the lake deepen from the colour of an old Beauges-de-Venise to a fiery fuchsia, seemed like a fitting close to a journey that had served mainly to whet my appetite for more. **FT**

12 VILLAGES TO VISIT IN THE RHÔNE VALLEY

This is a region rich in pretty villages that have been well-preserved through the centuries

For more places to visit in the Rhône Valley, go to www.francetoday.com/travel



TAIN-L'HERMITAGE

Wine and chocolate meet at this crossroads of some of the Rhône Valley's most prized appellations and the birthplace of Valrhona. It's also home to two giants of winemaking, Chapoutier and Jaboulet, as well as the Cave de Tain cooperative, whose wines are now rivalling the big names.



MIRMANDE

It is not an uncommon story in the Rhône Valley: a village in decline is brought back to life by an individual or means. Mirmande was a silk weavers' village that was abandoned in the late 19th-century and then revived in the early 20th century by the Cubist artist André Lhote.



CLIUSCLAT

Thanks to the abundance – and quality – of its clay deposits, this tiny medieval village rose to become a major pottery producer, with several hundred potters at the height of its industry in the mid-19th century. Its unbroken lineage is now preserved at the Poterie de Cliusclat.



GRIGNAN

Beautiful Grignan is the quintessential strolling village. Besides the eponymous château and its many medieval houses, other worthy sights here include the Collégiale Saint-Sauveur, the House of Justice, the place de la Fontaine, the *lavoir* and the Museum of Typography.



LA GARDE-ADHÉMAR

Like Mirmande, the medieval village of La Garde-Adhémar is included among the *Plus Beaux Villages de France*. This is a lovely place to come to stroll among picturesque stone houses, an ancient château and medieval ramparts that provide views over the valley to the mountains beyond.



LE POËT-LAVAL

This beautifully restored 14th-century town, another of the *Plus Beaux Villages de France*, is home to the Musée du Protestantisme Dauphinois, one of only three surviving Protestant temples in France, while the Centre d'Art Yvon Morin is one of the region's best art galleries.



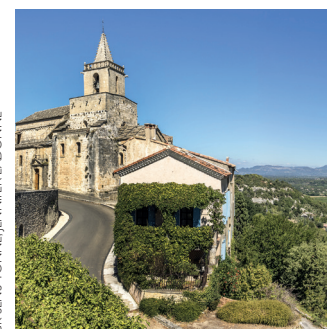
SAINT-MONTAN

This impossibly picturesque medieval town prospered from the 5th to the 15th century, but was abandoned in the early 1900s – until a group of artists decided to restore it. Now it's inhabited year-round by local families who are rebuilding its winding cobbled streets and houses piece by piece.



VAISON-LA-ROMAINE

The Roman bridge and extensive Roman ruins attract visitors to this ancient town. Perched on a hill above the new town, the old village is lovely to explore, and a great place to dine or stay. (I like the Hostellerie Le Beffroi for its old-world atmosphere, salt-water pool, rose garden and views.)



VENASQUE

This one-street village dates back to Roman times, the vestiges of which can be seen in the baptistery. There are splendid views from the medieval ramparts and the hiking paths surrounding the town deserve exploration too. In June, the Cherry Festival celebrates the area's produce.



GIGONDAS

Set in the shadow of the Dentelles de Montmirail and surrounded by vineyards, Gigondas has a leafy main square where you'll really feel you're in Provence. The Caveau is the place to taste the local wine, and the art gallery and garden walk above the town should not be missed either.



SÉGURET

Séguret, another of the *Plus Beaux Villages de France*, was here in prehistoric times, and vestiges of its Roman past can still be seen. The lively cafés and restaurants in its shaded medieval squares lend charm. You'll also find the Sainte-Thècle chapel and the Delage and Santons museums.



CRESTET

So named because of its perch on the crest of a hill, the village's labyrinthine cobbled streets lead to one of the oldest châteaux in Provence, dating to 860 AD. Hear the bells of Saint-Sauveur church, see the restored Renaissance-era houses, and visit the Chêne Bleu vineyards. **>>**

IMAGES © C. RODRIGUEZ, GIGONDAS; JENNIFER LADONNE

IMAGES © SHUTTERSTOCK/RENAUD-GOULD, GK SENS-YONNE, JENNIFER LADONNE

WHAT TO SEE AND DO IN THE RHÔNE VALLEY

Wine is the main attraction here, but there is much more to enjoy besides

For more wine tours in the Rhône Valley visit www.vins-rhone.com

OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES

The **ViaRhôna** is a 500-mile dedicated cycling route from Geneva that passes through the Côtes du Rhône vineyards on its way to the sea. www.viarhona.com

The **Pont d'Arc** is the place to go for canoeing, kayaking, swimming, biking, climbing and hiking. www.pontdarc-ardeche.fr

HERITAGE

Chauvet II

This UNESCO World Heritage Site is an absolute must-see in the Ardèche. As well as tours through the cave, there's an interactive museum and an ancient campsite where you can see how prehistoric people lived. www.grottechauvet2ardeche.com

Musée des Confluences

Lyon's newest museum, set at the confluence of the Saône and Rhône rivers, explores what it means to be human, and our interactions with the animal kingdom and our planet. www.museedesconfluences.fr

Lugdunum: Musée et Théâtres Romains

On the slopes of Fourvière hill, where the Roman city of Lugdunum was founded in 43 BC, this is a symbiosis of a UNESCO World Heritage Site with a museum of exceptional architecture and collections. www.lugdunum.grandlyon.com



Discover the ancient history of Lyon on the site of the Roman city

Musée des Tissus

Set in a 17th-century mansion, this museum traces the history of Lyon as the capital of the silk trade from the Renaissance to the 19th century. www.mtmad.fr

Musée de Valence

A museum of 15th-century to present day art, and archaeology from prehistory to Roman times, it includes Roman mosaics excavated nearby. www.museeavalence.fr



Learn what it means to be human at the Musée des Confluences in Lyon

WINE & FOOD

Gourmet Escapades

This small company specialises in personally-guided bespoke holidays in Provence for intimate groups of 2-6 people. You will be Karen's guests in beautiful accommodation in the historic heart of picturesque Saint-Rémy-de-Provence. www.gourmetescapades.com

Terres de Syrah

Discover and explore the vineyards and cellars of the northern Rhône Valley. Whether you are an oenophile or a neophyte, Terres de Syrah has an itinerary for you among the *crus* of the Drôme and the Ardèche. www.terresdesyrah.com

Tain-l'Hermitage

Cave de Tain offers wine tastings and outdoor experiences including cycling and Segway parallel scooter rides through the vineyards.

Chapoutier is a great place to learn about important Rhône vintages from both sides of the river and offers full- or half-day tours of the vineyards on electric bikes.

www.cavedetain.com

www.chapoutier-ecole.com

Cité du Chocolat Valrhona

Interactive exhibits guide you through all the magic of chocolate, with plenty of free samples as a learning aid. The café uses chocolate in all its dishes, and you can participate in a series of chocolate-making workshops. www.citeduchocolat.com

Nougat Arnaud Soubeyran

If you haven't tasted this Montélimar speciality, this is the place to do so. A tour through the museum (and past the kitchens) is informative. www.nougatsoubeyran.com

Distillerie Bleu Provence

Watch the lavender distillation process, visit a small museum, try a lavender-laced lemonade or local snack at the café, then shop till you drop at the marvellous boutique. www.distillerie-bleu-provence.com



Essential oils, skincare, perfumes, soaps, and more at Distillerie Bleu Provence

Caveau des Vignerons de Grignan-les-Adhémar

This is the place to come to taste a variety of local wines: AOC Grignan-les-Adhémar, Cru Vinsobres and Coteaux des Baronnies, and the sparkling blanc de blancs Clairette and Crémant de Die. www.grignan-adhemar-vin.fr

Rhonéa

This is an elegant space to try the legendary Beaufort-de-Venise, which is made exclusively from the Muscat grape, as well as the lesser-known but equally worthy reds, whites and rosés. You can also sample other local delights – olive oil, fruit juices, etc. Wines can be shipped worldwide. www.rhonea.fr

Caveau du Gigondas

Set in the village's charming square, here you can sample 100 of the great *cuvées* of this great appellation side by side to discover what all the fuss is about. More than 75 winemakers are represented here. www.gigondas-vin.com

Hospices de Gigondas

High in the village, in a medieval building with spectacular panoramic views, the *Atelier Sensoriel* at the Hospices de Gigondas provides an excellent opportunity to learn about wine by using all your senses. www.gigondas-vin.com

Vinadea

In Châteauneuf-du-Pape, Vinadea is the place to taste and buy a huge range of excellent wines from conventional or organic and biodynamic vintners.

And while tasting wine is great, there's nothing like going on a tour of a wine cellar where it all happens. At Domaine Pierre Usseglio you can ask all your questions and sample these highly regarded reds and whites. www.vinadea.com

Maison Brotte

This small but fascinating Musée du Vin gives you a concise yet comprehensive understanding of the wines of the Châteauneuf-du-Pape appellation and the Rhône Valley in general. Tastings are offered after the visit. www.brotte.com

Notre Dame de Cousignac

Another not-to-miss experience that you won't find elsewhere is wine-tasting in a cave. Claustrophobes needn't worry as the caves are wide open and well lit. But if that's not your thing, you won't miss out, as tastings at this scenic vineyard are wonderful too. www.ndcousignacvillegiature.fr



The Caveau du Gigondas is conveniently located in the village's main square

Les Routes des Vins

If you want to create your own itinerary for the Rhône wine region, the Vins Rhônes website is a great resource. Click on Visiter > Les Routes des Vins for a presentation of the 14 routes, which you can pick up and leave as you like. Information on accommodation is also provided. www.vins-rhone.com >>

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WHERE TO STAY AND EAT IN THE RHÔNE VALLEY

Our choice of the best hotels and restaurants in the area

For more places to stay in the Rhône Valley, visit www.francetoday.com/travel

HOTELS

Domaine Le Bois des Dames

This stylish four-star guesthouse blends traditional features and contemporary comfort with impeccable taste and chic style. The ten rooms and suites, all equipped with en-suite facilities, some with private terrace, offer views over the beautiful surrounding countryside. www.leboisdesdames.com

Chapoutier Gîtes

Six luxury houses provide serenity and privacy in the middle of some of Chapoutier's most prestigious vineyards. All come with self-catering kitchens, a fully-stocked wine cellar, a pool, gardens, terraces, and views for miles. Les Granits, an old wine grower's farmhouse, is the loveliest of them all. www.chapoutier-gites.com



Les Apothicaires in Lyon is leading the city's gastronomic renaissance

Coucoo Grands Cépages

Fifteen contemporary *eco-cabanes* surround a quiet, secluded lake in the Châteauneuf-du-Pape countryside. Each *cabane* is different, but all provide enough style and amenities (most come with either a sauna or hot tub) for the place to feel more like a resort than rustic cabins in the woods. Gourmet or healthy meals are delivered to your room via golf cart at your desired hour. A full range of treatments are available in a small spa. www.cabanesdesgrandscepages.com

La Divine Comédie

This utterly unique B&B in Avignon offers five exquisitely designed and furnished rooms set in a gorgeously appointed 17th-century mansion. Tall pines and palms shade a spacious, secluded garden complete with a pool and wellness *cabane*. www.la-divine-comedie.com

Fac & Spera Hôtel & Spa

You'll find this contemporary hotel near Tain-l'Hermitage train station, across from the Chapoutier boutique and tasting rooms and within walking distance of the Cité du Chocolat



Le Clair de la Plume offers stylish accommodation and Michelin-starred dining

Valrhona. Le Marius Bistro specialises in beef aged on the premises. www.pavillon-ermitage.com

Villa Maïa

Perched high on the Fourvière hill overlooking the *Vieille Ville*, two-year-old Villa Maïa is a major addition to Lyon's luxury hotel scene. Thirteen of the hotel's 37 rooms offer views of the entire city; the other 24 look over a pretty garden. The spa includes a day-lit pool, sauna and steam room. There is no restaurant but the lounge is a great place for a drink. www.villa-maia.com

Notre Dame de Cousignac

Visitors to Bourg-Saint-Andéol can experience the Ardèche countryside at this charming B&B set among a wine domaine's vineyards. The on-site restaurant provides all your meals and wine tastings are held in the wine bar or in a nearby cave. www.ndcousignacvillegiature.fr



Restaurant André is named after Anne-Sophie Pic's grandfather

RESTAURANTS

André

Named after Anne-Sophie Pic's grandfather (the founder of this multi-generational empire), this chic, wood-clad bistro honours the great chef's classic recipes in dishes like *escargots* and potatoes, smoked haddock, and the line-caught fish of the day. www.anne-sophie-pic.com

decorated, contemporary rooms above the wine shop offer upscale lodging.

www.loustalet-gigondas.com

Le Clair de la Plume

Situated at the foot of Grignan, all the rooms at this marvellous country hotel are quiet, spacious and filled with antiques; some even have their own private terrace or garden. Julien Allano wows diners at the hotel's Michelin-starred restaurant with the best local products and vintages. The bistro is another good choice. Buffet breakfast is served in the old hotel kitchen; elegant teas in the garden. www.clairplume.com



Wine tastings are held in the cave at Notre Dame de Cousignac

Le Kitchen Café

This cheerful little café, open seven days a week from 8am to 6.30pm, is the place for a delicious homemade breakfast of fresh pastries from the pastry chef co-owner or a gourmet lunch (reserve!) or teatime. www.lekitchencafe.com

Maison Pic

This 16-room luxury hotel above the restaurant provides an exemplary nightcap to your three-star meal at Anne-Sophie Pic's incomparable table. www.anne-sophie-pic.com

Les Apothicaires

The limited menus at Lyon's Les Apothicaires attest to the freshness and quality of a sophisticated cuisine that plays with flavours, textures and temperatures. www.lesapothicairesrestaurant.com

La Bijouterie

This veritable jewel of a restaurant in Lyon serves Asian-inflected French *tapas*. Excellent value for money. www.labijouterierestaurant.fr

Flaveurs

This superb restaurant in Valence showcases Michelin-starred chef Baptiste Pointot's sophisticated seasonal dishes. www.flaveurs-restaurant.com

L'Oustalet

This elegant little restaurant on a leafy square in beautiful Gigondas is the perfect spot to spend a gourmet afternoon. It's no surprise that the kitchen won its first Michelin star earlier this year. Three beautifully

RHÔNE VALLEY ESSENTIALS

GETTING THERE

BY PLANE

If you're going to start at the top, **Lyon Saint-Exupéry** is your airport. From the southwest it's **Marseille Provence** and from the southeast, **Nice Côte d'Azur**.

BY TRAIN

The main line from **Lyon to Avignon** includes stops at Vienne, Valence and Montélimar.

BY CAR

Follow the **A7** or the **N7**.

