

Beyond the Île-de-France

I'm a shameless Francophile. I'd be forgiven for romanticising the city of haute couture, haute cuisine, and all things haute in general, but Paris, while never failing to live up to expectations, is not the ultimate of all French offerings.



The French Riviera is also no secret, thanks to the annual Festival de Cannes, to iconic films from the likes of Hitchcock and Godard, and more recently, swarms of travel-blogging Instagrammers flocking to Europe each summer. But where I'm heading lies to the west of the much-hyped Cote d'Azur, and will soon be responsible for an enduring obsession with le Midi - the South of France.

We're taking up residence in the Mediterranean fishing village of Gruissan, a commune hosting a population of about 5000, for the better part of a month. Lonely Planet has named Languedoc-Roussillon, where Gruissan sits, one of the top 10 regions to visit in 2018. Much to my relief, though, its quiet charm appears to lie untouched by rabid tourists.

We settle in easily. Mornings are for walking to the local boulangerie and breakfasting on croissants and pain au chocolats; the bakery lets you know the exact times they'll come out of the oven during the day, so you can devour them hot. Afternoons are for the beach. Fine, gold sand and clear, azure waters, minus the crowds you'd find in the Riviera, make this a rare find. The midday June sun can be harsh,



however. A more shaded option is a self-guided tour through the old village centre. Boasting Tiffany-blue-windowed little houses draped in lush bougainvillea and overlooked by the medieval Barberousse Tower, the village is delightful. Thrice a week, it holds an open-air market; the paella, made before your eyes and piled with large langoustine prawns, clams and squid, is the unrivalled highlight. In the evenings, we stroll through the harbour front. We give in to the temptation of Chantilly cream-topped crêpes and lavender ice cream; we make frequent trips to the Patisserie for

madeleines, religieuses (stacked chocolate cream puffs) and the ganache-rich Opera cake.

Reading Johanna Spyri's Heidi as a child, I wondered how the young heroine could survive on a simple fare of bread and cheese. Here, I begin to see how. A baguette rustique coupled with creamy chunks of brie or camembert is enough to send one to raptures. Gruissan allows quick access to a range of nearby attractions. We spend a day at Carcassonne, a historic, walled-in city, only an hour's drive away. One of the biggest tourist attractions in all of France, it abounds in visitors, costly restaurants and souvenir shops. Yet the sheer size and extravagance (it incorporates 53 towers!) of

the medieval fortress makes it the stuff of fairytales. Another day is spent at Béziers, where we have the sizable grounds of the 14th century Cathédrale Saint Nazaire and the adjoining gardens completely to ourselves. In the ancient city of Avignon, erstwhile home of the Pope, we marvel at the largest gothic palace ever built.

Our favourite excursion comes from a stroke of luck: unsure of where to go next, we point randomly at an unknown name on the map and decide to drive to it. As it turns out, the tiny village of Venasque, comprised of about 50 houses, belongs to the officially recognized group of "Les Plus Beaux Villages de France" - the most beautiful villages of France. Sitting precariously atop a steep cliff, it presents astonishing views of the surrounding countryside.

What do these places have in common? What makes the long journey here from Paris - a permanent fixture on anyone's Europe bucket list - worth it? The fact that the region is miraculously, largely unplumbed by the masses. Encompassing brilliantly-hued lavender fields, unpeopled beaches and the world's largest vineyard, it has, up till now, managed to escape notice. You won't find any long lines, or packed tour-buses and hiked-up prices. Simply put, it is the best of France, without the worst.

By Tonima Hossain
Photo: Tonima Hossain

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