





Purple haze

The lavender fields of Provence are not all they seem. **Jon Bryant** heads for the hills to reveal the reality behind the popular tourist image ▶

Purple lavender fields are the essence of the poetic landscape of Provence. Set among the swathes of sunflowers, shining vines and stone dovecotes, the tight-fitting rows of endless mauve lavender is nature's own perfumed beauty and 'the very soul of Haute-Provence,' according to Provençal writer Jean Giono. There's only one problem; the picture in your mind and the contents of your wardrobe sachet are not lavender at all. It is lavandin, a man-made hybrid whose perfume and therapeutic properties are totally different from lavender's.

The two plants co-exist in south-east France, with the single-flowered, fine lavender appearing above an altitude of 800 metres, much of it high up on remote plains, while all the picturesque slopes in the tourist areas below are covered in purple expanses of lavandin.

The hybrid only started to be grown seriously in the 1950s, as a way of providing a fresh smell for washing powders and detergents. Unlike its frailer forefather, it doesn't have any medicinal properties but, claim the essential oil manufacturers, it can help with sleep and relaxation as well as being a light antiseptic.

Lavandin fields are regular alleys of similarly sized plants, giving the impression of a giant bishop's cloak laid across a bowling alley, while fine lavender grows in a more haphazard manner, in uneven clumps, which makes it more difficult to harvest.

Steam-powered stills

Having spent a decade living in the south of France, I realised that I had probably never even seen a field of real lavender. One hectare of lavender produces about 15 kilograms of essential oil, but the same area of lavandin can yield 100 kilograms. In Provence, for every bottle of lavender, there are ten of lavandin; all those potpourri sachets that I had bought for godmothers and aunts...

I decided to visit the lavender museum in Coustellet, a few miles from Gordes in the Luberon, to find out the truth. I was imagining a heavily scented, thatched cottage with an old woman emerging with purple fingers, but the Musée de la Lavande is actually a big, modern affair with a coach park, an audio guide in seven languages and a large gift shop.

The visit starts with a film about harvesting and distilling techniques, before continuing through rooms of ancient agricultural tools, metal canisters and giant copper stills. The early ones, from the 1500s, were handmade with no welds; long, graceful swan necks surging from flat-bottomed stills to eke out the finest essential oil. Later, steam-powered stills called alembics gained wheels which meant that the oil could be distilled directly in the fields.

These units grew in size to become mobile steam factories. Some were subtly converted to make alcohol from fermenting fruits, but when customs and excise officials grew wise to the practice, they forced the farmers to drill holes in the distillation coils to stop them being able to produce alcohol.



The lavender museum is surrounded, perhaps ironically, by lavandin. The guide told me to head towards the village of Saint-Saturnin-lès-Apt and then keep driving up to the high plains if I wanted to find real lavender.

The drive from Coustellet past the hilltop village of Gordes and across the Luberon plain offers the occasional splash of purple among the pear and cherry orchards, but it's all lavandin, because the

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Members of the Commanderie de la Lavande on parade in Digne-les-Bains; Sister Kaire (centre) and her helpers at a stall in Digne; The entrance to the Musée de la Lavande in Coustellet; Fields of fine lavender on the road to Sault; Lavender biscuits are a popular market choice
OPENING PAGES: Harvest time near Sault

PHOTOGRAPHS: JON BRYANT (OPENING PAGES) HEMIS/ALAMY



WHERE TO FIND LAVENDER

Each area of Provence has a few select spots in which to catch a vision of summer's purple perfection. In the Vaucluse and Alpes-de-Haute-Provence *départements*, visit the Plateau de Valensole and travel between the villages of Riez, Valensole and Oraison. In the Drôme and upper Vaucluse, go to Sault, Séderon and Ferrassières and further north, Valréas, Dieulefit and La Bégude-de-Mazenc. In the northern Drôme, try Crest, Saint-Julien-en-Quint and Saillans. A great source for lavender products is the market at Sault in Vaucluse, which dates from the early 1500s and is held on Wednesday mornings. Among the most emblematic visions of Provence are the purple fields which surround the Abbaye Notre-Dame de Sénanque, a 12th-century Cistercian monastery just outside Gordes. Here, you can watch the abbey's monks gather in the harvest.



altitude is too low for lavender. We drove on to Simiane-la-Rotonde, a perched village set above the vines and honey-makers, which has some colourful cafés, galleries and a pottery. Simiane owes its fame partly to a photograph taken by the legendary Henri Cartier-Bresson in 1969 that shows children sitting in the old covered market overlooking the fields below. I met some cyclists there, draped over the stone tables. They were taking part in a charity ride from

London to the resort of Saint-Tropez and told me they had just been cycling through fields of lavender. I thought it best not to correct them.

Simiane was once the centre of France's lavender industry and had the largest lavender co-operative in the world. The village's 12th-century château contains a lavender study centre, the Laboratoire d'Aromathérapie Sainte-Victoire, where visitors can learn all about oils, ancient production techniques ▶



ABOVE: Cans of lavender pâté at the market in Digne-les-Bains
RIGHT: Chapel with lavender and grain fields, Plateau de Valensole

and the real differences between the properties of fine lavender and lavandin oil.

Anne Furrasola, from the village tourist office, said that I would see some real fields of fine lavender in bloom if I continued my drive northwards, past Revest-du-Bion and Ferrassières, on the mountain route towards the Col de l'Homme Mort and Séderon. But did I really want to venture to Dead Man's Peak?

Up and up I drove, round hairpin bends and across windswept plains, closer and closer to the stark slopes of Mont Ventoux, until I came across not a host of golden daffodils, but a patch of purple opposite a roadside clearing. By this time, it was raining and getting dark, and the only other traffic was the occasional farm vehicle on the narrow road to the Col de l'Homme Mort.

Floral and herbaceous

With camera in hand, I approached the patch, which was clearly different from the manicured bushes of the low-plain lavandin. Here there were denim blue spikes and single-stemmed flowers merging from among bunches of green. This was it; a field of fine lavender. More than anything, it is the smell that tells you it's lavender. While lavandin has a fresh and full-throttled aroma, this lavender was floral and herbaceous. I crumbled off a few flowers as the skies turned dark and then headed back down towards civilisation and the perfect rows of lavandin.

My exploration continued with a visit to Digne-les-Bains, which bookends the lavender harvest season with a parade called a *corso* in late July and a *foire* at the end of August, when the air is thick with the scent of distilled oil. Digne is a characterful market town at the entrance to Haute Provence.

I travelled there on the single-track Train des Pignes from Nice and was met by a group of grey-haired men

and women in long, purple robes holding large books. They belonged to the *Commanderie de la Lavande de Haute Provence* and were resplendent in their finery, wearing

bright sashes and carrying their embroidered banner. The mood was a happy one because 2012 had generally been a good year for lavender.

Standing beside a wood-fired, bubbling still, members of the order presented their 2012 bronze medal to producer Véronique Blanc, whose acceptance speech concerned the virtues of the ancient methods of collection and ended in a triumphant, "*La lavande fine n'est pas morte!*" to a round of cheers. The order's president said the price of lavender had risen, which benefited the local economy. Although lavender had enjoyed a good year, lavandin had fared less well due to a lack of rain. "There are tighter restrictions on production ▶

A BRIEF HISTORY OF LAVENDER

Since Roman times, lavender has been used to scent baths, clean clothes and as a herbal remedy. Its name comes from the Latin *lavare* (to wash) or from a variant of *lividula* (livid in colour), depending on which source you believe. It is the traditional cure for head lice and burns. During medieval times and up to the beginning of the 19th century, the wild lavender growing in the scrublands of northern Provence largely satisfied the demands of shepherds, washerwomen and early *parfumeurs*. However, as Grasse's perfume industry started to expand at the end of the 19th century, increasing numbers of villagers in Provence began to cultivate lavender.

Production in Provence grew massively until the 1970s when cheaper lavender started to arrive from the East, mainly Bulgaria. French plants were becoming increasingly fragile and blighted with cicadelle insects which attacked their roots. The decline continued with the development of synthetic alternatives.

What saved the lavender industry was, in part, a beautiful myth. With lavender came the bees, the cicadas and the scented honey to create a portrait of a bounteous and scenic Provence that appealed to tourists. Then an interest in aromatherapy and natural, organic products increased demand for the real thing.

PROPERTIES AND USES OF LAVENDER ESSENTIAL OIL

Like wine and cheese, lavender has its own *appellation d'origine protégée*. To be granted the status, the oil has to be extracted using traditional methods and to come from a precise geographical area.

Besides its use in perfumes, lavender oil helps to treat insomnia, irritability, headaches, head lice, stress, cuts and burns, eczema, bedsores, sunburn and insect bites. It is said also to be effective in tackling colds and sinusitis, sore throats, cramps and rheumatism.

Lavandin is used in potpourri sachets and to scent soaps, detergents and washing powder. Its essential oil is claimed to have a calming and relaxing effect, and can be used as a light antiseptic.

In 1910, a French chemist, René-Maurice Gattefossé, burnt his hand in a laboratory accident and plunged it into a tub of lavender essential oil. He was amazed by how quickly the skin healed and how little scarring occurred. His conclusions were published in 1937 in a book entitled *Aromathérapie: Les Huiles Essentielles Hormones Végétales*, the first time the word aromatherapy had been used. The publication helped to launch a new industry in alternative medicine.



PHOTOGRAPHS: JON BRYANT; DREAMSTIME; ISTOCKPHOTO

With lavender came the
bees, the cicadas and the
honey to create a portrait
of a bounteous Provence





surrounded by lavandin, which we still cut by hand with sickles. We also make pottery, sandals and lemon curd, but mostly we produce essential oil, body lotion, soap and shower gel from lavandin.”

Lavender donkey

Opposite a lavender donkey mascot was the Richaud family’s lavender pâté stall. “Lavender gives the pâté a very fresh taste which hits your palate at the end!” said Mme Richaud. I wasn’t sure. Lavender soap and hand cream, definitely; lavender biscuits and syrup, probably, but lavender pâté? It just didn’t seem right, but she was selling hundreds of the tins.

Next to the Richauds were the lavender biscuit lady, three lavender distillery stands, the lavender-flavoured ice cream seller, the lavender facewash, handcream and lipgloss specialist, plus stalls offering lavender-scented pillows, lavender paper and even a lavender-filled, purple teddy bear that is warmed up in a microwave and used as a hot water bottle.

At the Distillerie du Siron stand, festivalgoers were loading up their bags from the racks of lavender and lavandin essential oils. Many of them, I imagined, were unaware that there was any difference between the two. 🌿

ABOVE: A shady spot near the village of Aurel in Vaucluse

which is good. We need to fight and to do this we need to stick together. *Vive la lavande!*” Everyone clapped and threw lavender into the air.

The ceremony ended and people went back to their stalls, muttering about hail earlier in the year ruining their crop and the cicadelle insect whose larvae eat lavender roots. Happier was Sister Kaire, who was just about to take her final vows and was running a stall with her fellow nuns. “Our convent is

FRANCOFILE

Exploring the lavender fields of Provence



GETTING THERE

By road/ferry: The lavender fields of Provence are around nine hours from the northern ferry ports.

By rail: Avignon TGV station is less than three hours from Paris.

By air: The nearest airports are Avignon, Nîmes and Marseille.

WHERE TO STAY

Camping Domaine des Chênes Blancs

Route de Gargas
84490 Saint-Saturnin-lès-Apt
Tel: (Fr) 4 90 74 09 20
www.homair.com
Mobile homes in June from €371.

Hôtel du Grand Paris

Boulevard Thiers
04000 Dignes-les-Bains
Tel: (Fr) 4 92 31 11 15

www.hotel-grand-paris.com
Doubles from €95.

La Bastide des Lavandes

Saint-Bonnet
26160 Puygiron
Tel: (Fr) 4 75 53 80 86
www.bastide-lavandes.com
Chambre d’hôte with doubles from €135.

WHERE TO EAT

L’Estrade

6 Avenue Victor Hugo
84490 Saint-Saturnin-lès-Apt
Tel: (Fr) 4 90 71 15 75
Meals from €15.

Restaurant L’Olivier

1 Rue des Monges
04000 Digne-les-Bains
Tel: (Fr) 4 92 31 47 41
www.resto-lolivier.fr
Menus from €27.

WHERE TO VISIT

Musée de la Lavande

276 Route de Gordes
84220 Coustellet
Tel: (Fr) 4 90 76 91 23
www.museedelalavande.com

Distillerie du Siron

Quartier le Gazon
04380 Thoard
Tel: (Fr) 6 25 12 67 17
www.distilleriesiron-lavande.fr
The lavender distillery is open in summer from 10am-noon and 2pm-6pm, but it is best to telephone first.

Les Chemins Bleus d’Argens

Village d’Argens
04170 La Mure Argens
Tel: (Fr) 4 92 89 09 22
www.bleudargens.fr
The Bleu d’Argens distillery runs guided

tours of the lavender fields on Thursdays and Sunday mornings during July and August.

Laboratoire Sainte-Victoire

Château de la Rotonde
04159 Simiane-la-Rotonde
Tel: (Fr) 4 92 75 98 90
www.laboratoiresainte-victoire.com
The laboratory runs courses on making essential oils.

L’Atelier de la Cuisine des Fleurs

16 Pont du Loup
06410 Tourrettes-sur-Loup
Tel: (Fr) 4 92 11 06 94
www.crea-t-yvesculinaire.com
Learn how to cook with lavender and flowers, with chef Yves Terrillon.

TOURIST INFORMATION

Provence-Alpes-Côte d’Azur tourist board

Tel: (Fr) 4 91 56 47 00
www.tourismepaca.fr

Sault-en-Provence tourist office

Tel: (Fr) 4 90 64 01 21
www.saulten-provence.com

Digne-les-Bains tourist office

Tel: (Fr) 4 92 36 62 62
www.ot-digne-lesbains.fr