

An aerial photograph of the Gorges du Verdon in France. The image shows a deep, rugged canyon with steep, rocky walls. A vibrant turquoise river winds through the center of the canyon. The surrounding landscape is a mix of dense green forests and rocky outcrops. In the distance, a wide valley opens up under a clear blue sky. The overall scene is one of natural beauty and adventure.

The drive of your life

The Gorges du Verdon were one of Europe's last secrets and provide a spectacular backdrop to a motoring adventure, as **Jon Bryant** discovers



PHOTOGRAPH: AVIL IMAGES/DOUG PEARSON

Less than two hours' drive from the holiday triumvirate of Nice, Avignon and Marseille, the Gorges du Verdon are Europe's most spectacular canyon and offers an exhilarating journey where the Alps meet the Mediterranean. While the gorge itself is probably most famous for canyoning, hiking and rock climbing, a pair of leather driving gloves and Wagner's *Ride of the Valkyries* at full volume on the car stereo can create an altogether superior effect.

According to Graham Robb in his book *The Discovery of France*, Europe's longest, deepest gorge remained a secret from the outside world until 1905, known only to a few woodcutters who descended into the chasms to find thick stumps of wood to make boules. Returning from exile on Elba, Napoléon had passed through nearby Castellane on his way to Paris in 1815 and Moustiers-Sainte-Marie had been a celebrated centre for fine pottery since the 17th century, but somehow no traveller had ever ventured the other side of the cliffs, or at least no one ever mentioned doing so. It barely seems possible, but the Gorges du Verdon were not fully navigated until almost 40 years after the same feat had been achieved through the Grand Canyon in the USA.

Cascading water

Moustiers-Sainte-Marie is the best place to start a scenic drive through the area. Overcrowded in the summer, it's a place to visit off-season, especially if you are preparing for the ride of a lifetime along the Gorges du Verdon. At an altitude of more than 600 metres, it offers cool respite on July and August evenings, and almost every restaurant and café has at least one window overlooking the ravine. The village itself is perched on both sides of a rocky precipice and you can hear the sound of water cascading everywhere. We came across the surreal sight of a red leather barber's chair bolted on to someone's terrace alongside the pavement, but whether this was for extreme-leaning, I don't know.

Moustiers has two types of visitor: hikers carrying alpine rucksacks or tourists carefully inspecting the famous *faïence* ceramics. Fine china, however, is not something you want in the car when attempting to drive the gorge, so we set off, weight distributed evenly across the back seat (two children gripping the inside door handles and a dog on the central seat) and headed on the D952 towards Castellane along the north route of the Gorges du Verdon.

We drove straight through La Palud-sur-Verdon and followed the sign for the *Route des Crêtes* (the crests' route). Just after some painted wooden cows, the road suddenly climbed dramatically towards the edge of the gorge. The first hairpin bend had some great views and a fence that reminded me of a Hornby train set, but at the second hairpin, we could feel the gorge tugging us down. Eight hundred metres below, the River Verdon looked like a tiny thread of cotton.

The *Route des Crêtes* took us higher and closer to the edge of the gorge, up to almost 1,500 metres, before ▶

LEFT: The spectacular Gorges du Verdon lay virtually undiscovered until the early 1900s

gently (and thankfully) spiralling back towards La Palud, for a steadying cup of mid-morning coffee. The village has a few antiques shops, grocers, a Sunday market, lots of accommodation and a couple of friendly looking cafés. It also houses the Maison des Gorges du Verdon, an 18th-century château with displays and information on the local geology, hydrology and wildlife.

High above, eagles and vultures followed the cars as they swerved round the bends towards the village of Rougon from where the famous *Sentier Martel* trail departs (this traces one of the original routes of the cave explorer Édouard-Alfred Martel, the first man to navigate the entire gorge in 1905). Beneath a huge rock, we followed a panel signalling the way to the Point Sublime (also designated by Martel) where there is a gravel car park and information about the Parc Naturel Régional du Verdon.

Limestone spirals

Most people getting out of their cars were dressed in sparkling clean hiking gear (as only the French could do) and making their way down to the tunnels and rocks of the lower canyon. It is obviously a totally different experience but there is something secure and superior about driving along the top of the cliffs. As we approached Chasteuil, the chasm beneath appeared to surge upwards in bizarre limestone spirals and stone waves. When you see the startling rock formations it is easier to imagine that the whole area was once buried under a warm, Jurassic sea.

After passing the rocky bars of the Cadières de Brandis mountains, the road's dramatic curves began to smooth out as we neared Castellane. It was here that the Roman *Via Aurelia* joined the *Via Domitia*, a crossroads of their empire.

Castellane is one of those places that makes you feel healthy. It's built into the solid rock and everyone there has a ruddy complexion and healthy appetite. You can also take a 30-minute walk to the *Chapelle Notre-Dame-du-Roc* which lies above the village.

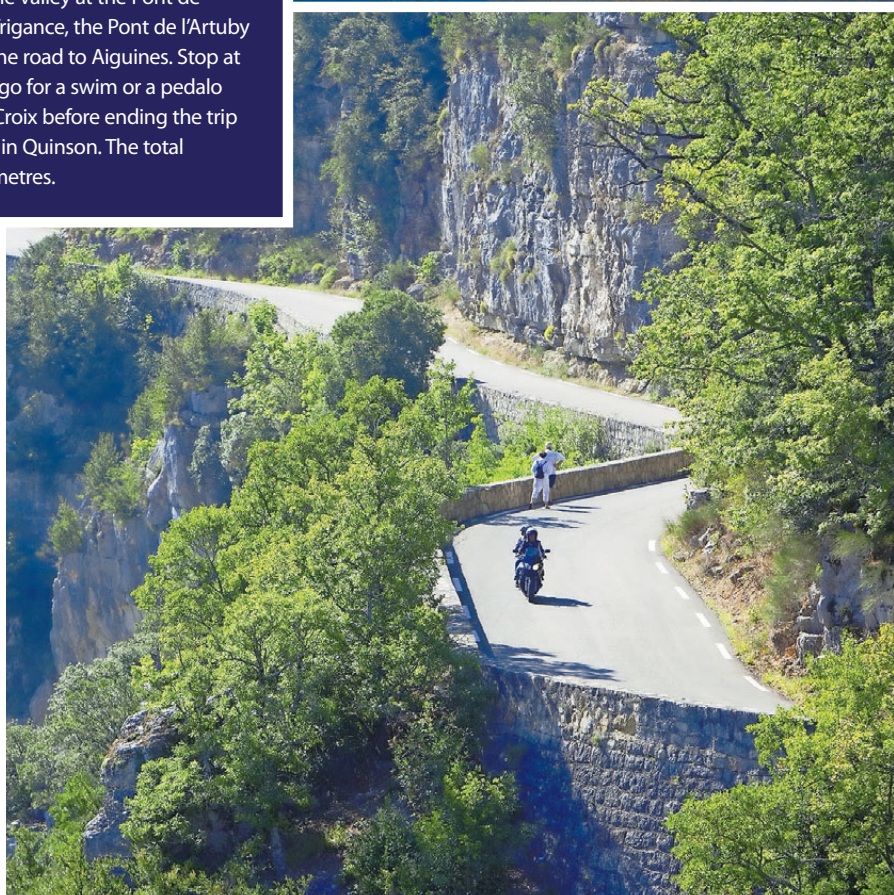
However, we decided to have lunch first in one of Castellane's café-restaurants which surround the main square, beside the pretty town hall and tourist office where you can sign up for walking expeditions, kayaks, rafting and gliding trips along the gorge.

The north bank route was completed in the early 1970s but the south side, which begins beside the bridge over the river at the *Couloir Samson*, was finished just after World War II. It is a more rugged and breathtaking drive. Old postcards of its construction are scary just to look at; lots of men waving at the camera



DIRECTIONS IN FULL

Start in Moustiers-Sainte-Marie, head to La Palud on the D952. Take the circular *Route des Crêtes*, and then go to Rougon and Chasteuil before reaching Castellane for lunch. Journey back on the opposite bank of the gorge. Cross the valley at the Pont de Soleils and then head for Trigance, the Pont de l'Artuby and the twisting turns of the road to Aiguines. Stop at Les-Salles-sur-Verdon and go for a swim or a pedalo ride on the Lac de Sainte-Croix before ending the trip at the prehistory museum in Quinson. The total distance is about 120 kilometres.





with half-eaten baguettes in their hands and hobnailed boots teetering on the edge of the precipice.

Just after the tiny settlement of Le Bourguet there is a Buddhist meditation centre on the left which could turn a day trip into a month-long vacation of silence. We took a short detour to Trigrance which has an indestructible-looking castle that is now a luxury hotel-restaurant where you dine in the vaulted armoury, lit by oversized candelabra, and take coffee on the crenelated terrace surrounded by suits of armour. Real falcons glide up the gorge and circle the nearby fields.

Past the views of the limestone ridges from the Balcons de la Mescla, this proved to be the most challenging part of the drive; snaking twists, sharp turns, double-backs and a road tantalisingly close to the rim of the gorge but with no conspicuous safety barriers. It has the poetic name of the *Corniche Sublime* and there are plenty of places to park and take in the view. It's also just north of the Canjuers military zone, so if you weren't already feeling as if you were trapped in a video game, tanks and rocket launchers could be approaching from your left!

Sunken village

As the kilometres began to decrease on the creamy-coloured milestones, picturesque Aiguines came into view. It has only 250 permanent residents, a simple chapel and a 15th-century fairy-tale castle with turrets and a varnished tiled roof. There is also a museum dedicated to wood turning, with some original old boules and ornate table legs on display. The wind can blow in Aiguines and on the edge of the village are rows of gnarled old oak trees which have been battered over the centuries but somehow survived. The wood-turning industry has all but disappeared but we saw honey sellers, goats' cheese manufacturers, saffron stalls and the occasional table covered with lavender stems and bottles of the local rosé.

By now, however, the colour around us was changing. The tombstone grey of the cliffs and dark wooden forests opened up to the extraordinary blue-green waters of the Lac de Sainte-Croix. France's largest reservoir was created when Electricité de France (EDF) flooded the valley in 1973 for its hydroelectric dam project. The turquoise waters of the lake add much to the picturesque panoramas of the gorge but for the residents of Les Salles-sur-Verdon that year was a traumatic one. Sitting at the bottom of the ravine, the village was submerged, Atlantis-style, forever.

A new village was built on a plateau at the side of the lake and bears the same name as its sunken predecessor. The villagers were offered new homes, but there was a lot of ill-feeling about the process. The church was



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: The village of Moustiers-Sainte-Marie; The River Verdon wends its way through the gorge; The château and chapel at Aiguines beside the Lac de Sainte-Croix; The Pont du Galetas at the entrance to the Lac de Sainte-Croix; The winding road in the Grand Canyon section of the gorge



ABOVE: Pedalos and other boats make a popular leisure attraction in the gorge

dynamited, family graves were dug up and moved into the new cemetery and the last of the residents forcibly moved out by the police just as the waters started to pour into the bottom of the valley.

The new Les Salles claims to be France's youngest village. A few door frames and the old fountain were rescued from the original settlement but everything else has a very 1970s feel. The main square is enormous, with a path leading down to the lake. The tourist office displays a collection of enlarged sepia postcards of its predecessor and there is a modern, Romanesque-style church with medieval beasts stuccoed on to its entrance. The first thing we saw was a great stone menhir facing the car park with a plaque in memory of Jean Gombert, the former mayor who never agreed to the move.

Nearby Bauduen was also due to be flooded but EDF changed the depth of the water it required beneath the dam and the village was reprieved. Today Bauduen lies on the banks of the lake, an equally unexpected destiny for what was once a 'perched' Provençal village. It has a wide choice of campsites, each with a shop, *boulodrome* and slowly turning washing machines.

We left on the 'new' road towards Baudinard-sur-Verdon, with its tiny chapel where (on a clear day) you can see six *départements*, before twisting down to the water's edge at Sainte-Croix-du-Verdon. Here shacks sell panini, fruit juices and *crêpes*, and you can hire pedalos (with slides on them) and silent, electric speedboats (which don't live up to their name).

The water, which is like a huge hotel swimming pool, will eventually be drunk by hotel guests in Provence and it feels slightly creepy to be splashing around above a submerged village and a couple of sunken bridges, but in the summer, it's irresistible.

Shaking the towels off and making sure the dog was not still on the pedalo, we drove the 20 minutes to Quinson which has a cutting-edge museum of prehistory, designed by British architect Norman Foster. It has become a magnet for the area's schoolchildren (and their more interested parents) and holds fire-making sessions and flint-tool demonstrations. There are mock-ups of primitive man and a prehistoric village and cave. A hairy mammoth and a hairier yeti are waiting to welcome visitors in the foyer.

What Martel did in 1905 when he navigated the length of the canyon was to publicise the fact that the gorge existed. Of course, people had been there before and there were bridges and wrecked cabins to prove it, but it showed that the French, even locals, weren't aware of the incredible scale and spectacular beauty of the canyon. Now, it is known to the wider world. [📍](#)

FRANCOFILE

Taking a break in the Gorges du Verdon

GETTING THERE

By road: Moustiers-Sainte-Marie is an 11-hour drive from the northern ferry ports.

By rail: Les Arcs Draguignan station, a 45-minute drive away, is just under five hours from Paris Gare de Lyon.

By air: The nearest airport is Marseille (see our *Holiday Planner* on page 88).

WHERE TO STAY

Château de Trigrance

Route du Château
83840 Trigrance
Tel: (Fr) 4 94 76 91 18
www.chateau-de-trigrance.fr

La Bastide de Moustiers
Chemin de Quinson
04360 Moustiers-Sainte-Marie
Tel: (Fr) 4 92 70 47 47
www.bastide-moustiers.com

Le Nouvel Hôtel du Commerce

Place Marcel Sauvaire
04120 Castellane
Tel: (Fr) 4 92 83 61 00
www.hotel-du-commerce-verdon.com

WHERE TO EAT
L'Auberge du Point Sublime
04120 Rougon
Tel: (Fr) 4 92 83 60 35

Le Moulin de Soleils
Quartier Combes-de-Soleils
83840 Trigrance
Tel: (Fr) 4 94 76 92 62

La Terrace
04120 Rougon
Tel: (Fr) 4 92 31 47 74

WHERE TO VISIT
Musée de la Faïence
04360 Moustiers-Sainte-Marie
Tel: (Fr) 4 92 74 61 64

Musée de Préhistoire des Gorges du Verdon
Route de Montmeyan
04500 Quinson
Tel: (Fr) 4 92 74 09 59
www.musee-prehistoire.com



TOURIST INFORMATION

Castellane tourist office
Tel: (Fr) 4 92 83 61 14
www.castellane.org

Parc Naturel Régional du Verdon
Tel: (Fr) 4 92 74 68 00
www.parcduverdon.fr