

## Exploring the south of France's spectacular national parks

**Monique Rivalland kayaks the canyons of Les Cévennes and swims in the fjords of Les Calanques on a nature-filled trip to Provence**



Port Pin, Les Calanques

GETTY IMAGES

It's golden hour in the valleys of Les Cévennes. Rivers shimmer and rocky peaks radiate soft light. I am drinking it all in from a canoe, floating aimlessly along the Chassezac River, winding through a deep canyon into what feels like a vast unknown.

That an area of such size (it's the biggest national park in [France](#)) and beauty can remain so unvisited is astonishing. Les Cévennes falls largely in the south-central Occitanie region, just west of Provence, forming the southeastern rump of the Massif Central mountain range. It is a world of granite, limestone and shale, of crystalline waters and mountain villages — and very few tourists.

Those in the know are almost certain to bring up Robert Louis Stevenson, who wrote *Travels with a Donkey in the Cévennes*, an early outdoorsy memoir that is credited with presenting,

for the first time, hiking and camping as a recreational activity. There is now a Stevenson trail, which runs 168 miles south from Le Monastier-sur-Gazeille in the Haute-Loire to Saint-Jean-du-Gard, a model Cévennes town in the heart of the park's Vallée Française. It's a stretch for the hiking hardcore and typically takes 11 days, with walkers sleeping in auberges, simple French inns, along the way.



La Maison Papillons, Les Cévennes

I am taking a more leisurely (and more comfortable) approach, staying in a chic guesthouse called La Maison Papillons just outside the northeastern tip of the park, in the hilltop hamlet of Monteil. It sits almost right on the border between Gard and Ardèche, two of the départements that make up Les Cévennes. From here a week-long tour will take me east to Provence's Luberon Natural Park and south to the coastal fjords of Les Calanques, stopping off in three boutique hotels.

"Luxury" is not the main calling of Les Cévennes. The indulgence is its pristine landscape. But Olivier and Caroline Girault de Burlet have managed to blend the two beautifully at La Maison Papillons.

Olivier is showing me his "bible" — the maps, geology and history of Les Cévennes. "It is a treasure," he says of the park with a grin. Here is a man who personifies joie de vivre. Over a coffee he extols the region's walks, its wine and cheese and tells me about the abundance of mulberry trees, which once fed the silk industry in Lyons. Olivier, it transpires, is a guide.

The couple have been devoted to the region for 20 years, spending five of those converting what was once a derelict farmhouse sheltering livestock into a five-room guesthouse with a self-catering duplex, where I am staying.

It has a colossal double-height window, so I can lie on the mezzanine bed and watch the sun rise behind the woodlands. The decor is earthy, with natural linens, rattan lamps, handmade ceramics, and furniture from La Brocante, the antiques market that every year takes over the nearby bigger (but still tiny) town of Barjac. There is a pool and a petanque pitch among a garden of jasmine, rosemary and honeysuckle. Olivier paints the landscape from his balcony. He is also an artist.

On my first night we have an intimate dinner in the courtyard served by the couple's daughter, Jade. Now Olivier is sommelier. He serves us delicious wines from vineyards less than two miles from the house — Le Clos des Senteurs is an organic coteaux de l'Ardèche. The goat's cheese we eat is from nearby Monteil. The neighbouring hamlet Massargues is home to one of the top olive oils in the world, the Cuvée Sauvage. I have extreme life envy.



Gorges de la Nesque in Luberon National Park  
ALAMY

About 40 minutes' drive away are the Gorges de l'Ardèche, 19 miles of gorges sometimes called, perhaps a little lazily, the European Grand Canyon. This is the setting for my serene canoe trip, but you can also swim, hike, bike and rock climb.

A little further takes visitors to Les Cévennes proper, where we do a moderate three-hour walk through forests and across clifftops looking down on the muddle of rivers below. The region is ideal for wild swimmers — fresh water, no strong currents, magnificent surroundings — as well as for serious cyclists. Olivier is a serious cyclist. *Bien sûr!* He plots a bespoke 60-mile loop for my boyfriend, who heads out one morning at first light and returns saying it was one of the best rides of his life.

On our last night we cook for ourselves and sit on the terrace as the stars prickle the sky. Olivier is in the garden searching in vain for his black chicken in the dark.

From here it is a sublime two-hour drive east past Avignon to the Luberon, twisting through lavender fields and eventually up a track to a remote ranch called Domaine du Castellas. At Castellas the goat is king. A herd greets us at the door, along with Marie-Pierre, the hotel manager.



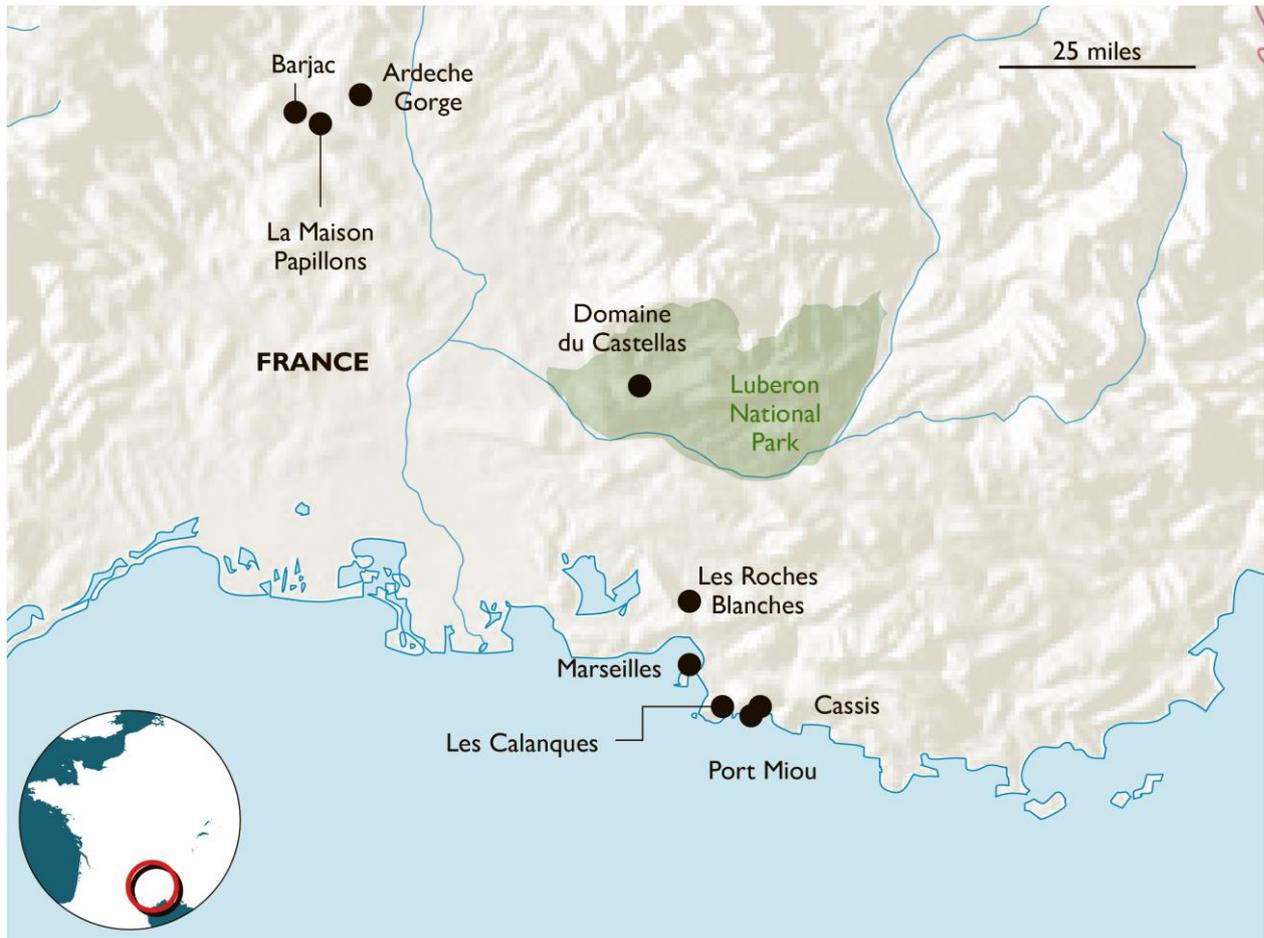
Domaine du Castellas, Luberon  
CECILE L HERMITTE

After we recover from the 360-degree views (there are no other buildings in sight) we are shown into the hotel, which is as cosy as a ski lodge, with super-fluffy white goat skins lining the chairs. And it's just as well because the weather is turning.

I am a little nervous about how we'll fill two days at the top of a mountain on a goat farm in the rain but my worries are quickly dispelled. Castellas is a hotel for all seasons, which is reflected in the gigantic rooms (apartment-size), which blend Scandi beach house with farmhouse snug. There is also a thermal bath and bio-sauna — in a sort of shepherd's hut — so you can sit and sweat and watch the sky darkening over Provence.

Tuesday night is slow-life night at Castellas, which means the restaurant does not offer full service but instead the chef Antoine prepares a gourmet picnic basket for guests to eat anywhere on the grounds. Luckily our room has not one but two terraces — one with views of Les Cévennes in the distance and the other with the Alps. We opt for the Alps.

This is no normal pique-nique. Sarah, who is restaurant manager, sommelier and all-round charming host, pairs a light natural red to our food, which consists of three starters (one is tartare of sar, similar to sea bream), a main (goat pie, naturally) and homemade goat's cheese with honey from the farm's bees.



The food at La Castellas is first-class and affordable. On our second night we have the full dinner service, which costs £37 and includes, again, three starters, roast duck, a cheese course and dessert. We manage to walk off our gluttony in a window of dry weather the next morning, completing a two-hour loop hike that starts around the corner from the hotel in the hamlet of Sivergues, and takes us up, down and around the highlands of Buoux.

We stop for lunch in the nearest village, Seignon. Of all the blockbuster towns you can visit in the Luberon — Gordes, Bonnieux, Sault — this turns out to be the most gorgeous, sitting in splendour on a vertiginous bluff, with fountains and floral-walled streets. It is also empty. We celebrate with a beer and a quiche lorraine.

The final part of our trip delivers us to the Mediterranean coast, to the fishing town of Cassis, which is the gateway to the cliffs of Les Calanques and home to a glitzy hotel called Les Roches Blanches.

En route we pop into H el ene Darroze's new restaurant at Villa La Coste, which has just been awarded a Michelin star. Lunch is a five-course tasting menu inspired by the gardens of

Provence, while sitting in a glass box surrounded by the gardens of Provence. We try asparagus three ways with red tuna tartare, artichokes à la barigoule (artichoke hearts cooked in white wine, a classic spring dish), morel mushrooms with braised sweetbreads and Darroze's signature baba customised with an Armagnac of your choice. A post-lunch "art walk" through the Villa La Coste estate rounds things off nicely with large-scale works by world-famous artists including the sculptors Louise Bourgeois and Alexander Calder, set against the Provençal hills.

From here it's an hour's drive to France's newest national park, Les Calanques, which stretches 12 miles between Marseilles and Cassis and has exploded in popularity since it was given protected status a decade ago. And for good reason: it offers 26 mighty fjords, narrow inlets with huge cliffs and azure waters. It is a spectacular wilderness in the garden of a big city.



The pool at Les Roches Blanches

When we arrive at Les Roches Blanches, which has just reopened after a substantial renovation adding a private eight-person villa with two pools for the many ultra-high-net-worth individuals who come here, it is clear that this is a more traditional take on French sophistication. There are valets and gold luggage trolleys and an adjoining Sisley spa. Opened in the early 1920s, the hotel retains much of its art deco style and has a prime position on a rocky headland, on which robed guests lie on sunloungers positioned to face Cap Canaille, France's tallest sea cliff, which juts impressively into the Med.

Our room has a terrace overlooking the Cap ahead and the port of Cassis to the east. One afternoon we walk west and, after 15 minutes, arrive at Calanque de Port-Miou, which is full of yachts. After another 45 minutes we reach Port Pin. Reaching the third Calanque, En Vau,

involves a hairy 45-minute descent, but it delivers vertigo-inducing precipices and dazzling turquoise sea — perfect for a swim.

The climb home is a challenge, which makes our return to Les Roches Blanches all the sweeter. After a four-hour round trip we're gasping for sustenance, and it arrives in the form of a truffled mortadella panini and a bottle of Mirabeau rosé by the pool. It's not quite Robert Louis Stevenson and his donkey but it's bliss.

*Monique Rivalland was a guest of La Maison Papillons (B&B doubles from £126; [lamaisonpapillons.fr](http://lamaisonpapillons.fr)); Domaine du Castellas (room-only doubles from £303; [domaineducastellas.fr](http://domaineducastellas.fr)); and Les Roches Blanches (B&B doubles from £539; [roches-blanches-cassis.com](http://roches-blanches-cassis.com))*



La Bouitte, Vanoise National Park  
ALAMY