

Getting Started

Planning a trip to the region is as straightforward or as tricky as you make it: razz around Riviera hot spots in July and August and you need to book everything months in advance to make it affordable. But hop south to Marseille for an autumnal city break and planning time hovers close to zero.

WHEN TO GO

Not in hot-and-bothered July and August when holiday-makers hog the region, clogging up roads and hotels and making life in the blistering heat unbearable.

May and June are the best times, followed by September and October. Spring is a cocktail of flowering poppy fields and almond trees. In September vines sag with plump red grapes, pumpkin fields glow orange and the first olives turn black in van Gogh's silver-branched olive groves. The *vendange* (grape harvest) starts around 15 September, followed by the *cueillette des olives* (olive harvest) from 15 November through to early January.

If you ski, late December to March is your season. Lavender fields blaze purple for two or three weeks any time between late June and mid-July.

COSTS & MONEY

Accommodation will be your biggest expense: count on €70 minimum a night for a midrange double with bathroom in a hotel or *chambre d'hôte*. Hostel-sleeping, bread-and-cheese-eating backpackers can survive on €40 a day; those opting for midrange hotels, restaurants and museums will easily spend €120.

TRAVEL LITERATURE

Provence and the Côte d'Azur inspired writers two centuries ago –and still inspires today. Literature evoking specific places is listed in destination chapters. For books on history, culture and gastronomy, see the History, Culture and Food & Drink chapters.

Essential reading for a general overview:

Travels through France & Italy (Tobias Smollett) The Scottish author's ruthless candour prompted outrage in Provence when this book was published in 1766.

Queen Victoria and the Discovery of the Riviera (Michael Nelson) Colourful account of Queen Victoria's nine visits to the Côte d'Azur from 1882.

A Motor-Flight through France (Edith Wharton) Amusing account of the author's motor trip from Paris to Provence in 1906 and 1907.

Everybody Was So Young (Amanda Vaill) Beautiful evocation of an American couple and their glam set of literary friends (F Scott Fitzgerald, Hemingway, Cole Porter, Picasso etc) on the Côte d'Azur in the jazzy 1920s.

See Climate Charts (p401) for more information.

HOW MUCH?

Filled baguette €4

Croissant and *café au lait* €3

Local/foreign newspaper €1/3

Ten-minute taxi ride €15

Metro, tram or city bus ticket €1.40

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Litre of petrol €1.30

50cl bottle of Evian next to Monaco's Oceanographic Museum/elsewhere €3/1

Cheap/expensive bottle of wine €4/25

Souvenir T-shirt €25

Ice cream (two-scoop cone) €2.50 to €3.70

DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...

- Valid travel insurance, ID card or passport and visa if required
- Driving licence, car documents and car insurance
- Sunglasses, sun cream, hat, mosquito repellent, a few clothes pegs and binoculars
- An insatiable appetite, a pleasure-seeking palate and a thirst for good wine
- Your sea legs

TOP TENS

Festivals & Events

The region loves to party. Proof of the pudding: legendary *fêtes* are a dime a dozen. See p405 for regional festivals and the respective destination chapters for town-specific festivals.

- Carnaval de Nice, February (Nice; p270)
- Pèlerinage des Gitans, May & October (Stes-Maries de la Mer; p147)
- Fête des Gardians, May (Arles; p148)
- Cannes International Film Festival, May (Cannes; p302)
- Formula One Grand Prix, May (Monaco; p396)
- Fête de la Transhumance, June (St-Rémy de Provence; p190)
- Les Chorégies d'Orange, late July to early August (Orange; p172)
- Festival de Marseille, July (Marseille; p104)
- Festival International d'Art Lyrique d'Aix-en-Provence, July (Aix-en-Provence; p126)
- Festival d'Avignon & Festival Off, July (Avignon; p163)

Thrills

- Paddle by moonlight through emerald waters in Les Calanques (p115)
- Bathe like a Roman in *Aquae Sextiae* (p127)
- Skip across the top tier of the Pont du Gard (p200)
- Feast on *bouillabaisse* at Chez Jo on the sand; no obligation to strip (p365)
- Be a gorge explorer (p232)
- Hunt truffles with Dominique, Eric and Mirette, *le chien truffier* (p178)
- Canoe from Fontaine de Vaucluse to L'Isle sur la Sorgue (p188)
- Lap up luxury and legend around the pool for a day at the Cap Ferrat hotel of Lebanese diamond dealer Robert Mouawad (p284)
- Play the hedonist in millionaire Monaco (p387)
- Catch a Roma band during Stes-Maries de la Mer's astonishing May and October pilgrimages (p142)

Chambres d'Hôtes

Simply the best to sleep, dream, eat and experience picture-postcard Provence.

- La Bastide des Papes (p164)
- La Forge (p218)
- La Bastide de l'Adrech (p230)
- Le Mas des Câpriens (p229)
- Relais d'Elle (p248)
- La Bastide aux Camélias (p286)
- La Parare (p290)
- Les Cabanes d'Orion (p320)
- Villa Ste-Maxime (p320)
- La Grande Maison des Campaux (p364)

Dramatic Drives

- Col de Canadel, Corniche des Maures (p364)
- D36B from south of Arles to Salin de Giraud (p150) then D36D to Plage de Piémanson, Southeastern Camargue (p151)
- D39 from Collobrières to Gonfaron, Massif des Maures (p360)
- Moyenne Corniche, Nice to Beausoleil (p285)
- Col de l'Espigouler, Gémenos to Plan d'Aups (p120)
- Rte des Crêtes, Cassis to La Ciotat (p118)
- Formula One Grand Prix circuit, Monaco (p396)
- Europe's highest mountain pass, the Col de Restefond la Bonette, Vallée de la Tinée (p252)
- Rte des Crêtes and Corniche Sublime, Gorges du Verdon (p235)
- Grand Corniche, Nice to Roquebrune (p286)

Provence A – Z (Peter Mayle) The best, the quirkiest, the most curious, the funniest and indeed, the most bizarre moments of the 20-odd years this best-selling author has spent in Provence – organised alphabetically.

The Collected Traveller: Provence (Barrie Kerper) 'Inspired anthology and travel resource' comprising hundreds of Provence-related magazine- and newspaper-published articles collected by the author over a couple of decades.

Words in a French Life: Lessons in Love and Language from the South of France (Kristen Espinasse) Excerpts from the author's blog (p38), capturing daily life in Provence through a series of day-to-day French words.

INTERNET RESOURCES

AngloINFO Riviera (www.angloinfo.com) Life on the Côte d'Azur in English; lots of predeparture planning links.

Avignon & Provence (www.avignon-et-provence.com) Provence and French Riviera accommodation guide oozing charming *chambres d'hôtes*.

Comité Régional de Tourisme Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur (www.decouverte-paca.fr) Fabulous regional tourist board website.

Comité Régional du Tourisme Riviera Côte d'Azur (www.guidriviera.com) Exceptional online guide to the coast, crammed with unusual discovery ideas alongside solid practical information.

Lonely Planet (www.lonelyplanet.com) Notes and posts on travel in Provence.

Provence Beyond (www.beyond.fr) Comprehensive tourist guide.

Provence-Hideaways (www.provence-hideaway.com) Exceptionally well-written travel guide covering inland western Provence.

Provence Web (www.provenceweb.fr) Comprehensive tourist guide.

TER-SNCF (www.ter-sncf.com/paca) Regional train tickets, fares and schedules.

Snapshot

The blanket ban on smoking in public places, coming up for France in 2008, will go down with little fuss in affluent fat-cat Provence and the Côte d'Azur, where the living is laid-back and easy – and wholly outside in the shade of the hot Mediterranean sun for a handsome chunk of the year. Not that the chic, avant-garde clubs and café terraces on the Côte d'Azur won't feel it – this is, after all, where Jean-Paul Sartre scrolled parts of *Roads to Freedom* (p350), cigarette in hand, and where a sultry Brigitte Bardot (a Gitanes woman through and through) set the trend for gals to smoke Cuban cigars. This privileged stretch of celebrity-studded coastline smacks of everything the cigarette in France embodies: sex, scandal, cinema, more sex and Gallic chic.

Rebel-yells in rough-cut Marseille might have something to say about it. Not ones to hold back (just look at that head butt, gone down in the annals of unforgettable sporting moments, by the port city's biggest hero Zinedine Zidane – it had the city, not to mention the world, talking for days!), born-and-bred Marseillais are the first to speak their mind – in theatrical torrents of thick sing-song and wild gesticulations. Or maybe IAM, Massilia Sound System or another of Marseille's cutting-edge sounds (p68) will simply bemoan the death of public smoking in a rhapsody of chart-topping rap. Incidentally, to anyone who read in the international press in mid-2006 about the gangster shoot-out in a bar in the east of Marseille (an armed gang burst in and sprayed it with bullets, killing three), there is no need for alarm: the city's underworld generates a murderous story every decade or so to ensure Provence's most diverse and completely addictive city doesn't lose its magnificently gritty edge. No wonder Europe plumped for the region's largest urban conglomeration and biggest trendsetter as the stage for its first street-art school (p58).

Of course there is no chance of stumbling across a fag end (or gunfire for that matter) in squeaky-clean Monaco where the living is extra easy (should you have an excess of cash) – and strictly by the rules. The recently crowned prince, in this land of fairy-tale princesses, grapples with making financial affairs more transparent in this legendary tax haven, while millionaire members of Monaco's exclusive yacht club are revelling in the fabulous design Sir Norman Foster is drawing up for their new portside clubhouse. Should you want to move into Monégasque circles, a one-bedroom apartment costs around €1 million – add another €1 million for each additional bedroom you fancy. Better perhaps to do what a sizable wedge of the working population does: commute to Monaco by train from France where a dreamy 140-sq-metre converted *bergerie* (sheepfold) with 7882 sq metres of land near Fayence is on the market for €742,000 and an old stone 70-sq-metre house in Murs with two hectares of land, water but no electricity and *beaucoup de charme* (bags of Provençal charm) costs €299,000.

Of course, if current talks on extending France's superspeedy, state-of-the-art TGV service from Marseille along the sparkling azure coast to Nice ever come to fruition – placing Paris a quicker-than-lightening 3½ hours away – there's no saying where one could end up.

FAST FACTS

Population: 4.74 million

Area: 31,399 sq km

GDP: €21,020 per inhabitant

GDP growth: 0.5%

Unemployment: 11.8%

Monthly net salary: €1225

Population density: 145 people per sq km

Life expectation: men 76yr, women 83yr

Largest cities: Marseille, Nice & Toulon

Percentage of *résidences secondaires* (second homes): 17.2% of all homes

On the Road



NICOLA WILLIAMS Coordinating Author

For Nicola, an English journalist living and working in France for the past 10 years (home today is a hillside house with a Lake Geneva view in Haute Savoie), it is an easy getaway to France's hot south. She has spent endless years eating her way around the region and revelling in its extraordinary art heritage and vibrant landscapes. When she's not working for Lonely Planet, she can be found in the Alps skiing or hiking, strolling around Florence or flitting between family in Britain and Germany. Nicola wrote the 1st edition of *Provence & the Côte d'Azur* in 1999 and has worked on numerous other Lonely Planet titles, including *The Loire and France*.



CATHERINE LE NEVEZ Catherine first lived and travelled in France aged four and has been hitting the road at every opportunity since, completing postgrad qualifications in editing, writing and publishing along the way. She's previously scoured Provence and the Côte d'Azur for Lonely Planet's *France* guidebook and online reviews across the region including Nice and Marseille – for which she's also authored European city break guides. She loves rambling across the wildflower-strewn countryside of Pays de Forcalquier, sipping pastis in Marseille's sweltering backblocks bars, driving among the vineyards during the *vendage*, and scrambling through the Gorges du Verdon in snow... and lingering in the Provençal markets, any time of year.

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