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DESTINATION INSIGHT

Friday, 10 March, 2017, 15 : 23 PM [IST]

## FRENCH CONNECTION - Exciting Villages of Luberon, Provence

Amala Dantas



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Everyone has either heard or visited Provence, located to the South East of France, bordering Italy to the east, the Mediterranean Sea to the South, the Languedoc Roussillon region to the west & the Rhone Alps to the north. It is a beautiful & stunning region of France, full of character, a sweet moderate climate & pure clean air. The incredible contrasts between its rich & natural environment – the blue skies, the lavender fields, the subtle nuances of the green forests & the flamboyant colours of the cliffs of ochre, red or the stark white of the limestone hills all adds to its beauty & charm.

Some years ago we had based ourselves in Avignon, and did day trips to Aix-en-Provence, Arles & Marseilles. This fuelled our appetite to explore Provence in more detail.

Last June we decided to explore the small villages of Provence in France. We stayed in a lovely airbnb place called "Mazet Des Lavandes" next to Pierre Cardin's Chateau Parottier & spent glorious six nights in the tiny village of Lioux in the Luberon Valley. A car is very essential & we hired one at Marseille airport.

Lioux is a small village north of Apt and at the foot of the Monts de Vaucluse . The village is part of the Luberon Regional Park .The village is at the foot of the "cliff Madeleine" (locally called Falaise de la Madeleine) which is an imposing & magnificent cliff of grey limestone, the huge Rock is 700 meters long & over 100 meters high and towers the village of Lioux.

Lioux is far from the main highways, a beautiful, serene, & calm village. Nearby are the villages of Murs 7 km, Roussillon 8 km, Joucas 6 km, Goult 11 km, Villars 14 km, Gordes 12 km, Apt 14 km, Bonnieux 21 km, all just a short drive away.

Our host Ann Parker & her husband Mike run a superb B&B (ann1952parkes@gmail.com) & were fantastic in giving us all the tiny details about the area. The house was beautiful & one could see the Falaise de la Madeleine from the terrace of our room which changed colours from white to golden as the rays of the sun fell on its wall. It was the most stunning sight to see the cliff with the sun's rays reflected on its surface giving it a glorious white hue in the mornings & changed to a golden colour with setting the sun. Ann informed us about the weekly Village Markets that moved from one village to another. If you missed it in one village you could catch it in another. Visiting the village markets was to experience the local Provencal flavor, full of vivid colours & vitality.



Our first taste of the village market was at the Lourmarin Market held every Friday morning in the centre of the village. We jostled alongside the locals & tourists through the streets, feasting our eyes on a huge array of fresh local, seasonal fruit and vegetables; meat, fish, bread, olives, tapenade, honey and preserves, herbs and spices, cheese, goat cheese, flowers, oils and wines, ready-to-eat rotisserie chickens, Provençal fabrics and house-wares, clothes, straw hats, jewellery & the famous Provençal pottery. Walking through the market was a heady experience. Other small nearby villages we drove through were Bonnieux, Lacoste & Menerbes.

Next morning, was the Saturday Market in Apt which is the biggest of the Luberon weekly markets & is held at the Place des Martyrs de la Résistance. This market takes place every Saturday morning year-round, and dates back to about 900 years. The market spreads through several winding alleys and squares in the heart of old town. Apt is 10 km from Lioux & the market is very popular as thus attracts hordes of locals from the nearby villages as well as tons of tourists which gives the town a very festive & colorful ambience and parking can be an issue if one arrives late. It is a very typical Provençal town reputed for its fresh local produce. There is a real buzz, vitality & vibrancy in the air as you stroll from stall to stall soaking in the flavours & sights & partaking in the jovial camaraderie of the shoppers & tradesmen. Lots of local different cheeses, honey soaps & of course lavender pouches for its fragrance were on display.

Evening we visited the village of Gordes, 10 km from Lioux. The drive was very picturesque as the road on either side was full of lavender fields in full bloom which made you feel that you are going through a painting by Monet. Gordes stands on the edge of the plateau of Vaucluse & is better known as a hilltop town of the Luberon. Gordes is listed as "One of the most beautiful villages of France", The village is set around the rock & the white & grey stone houses rise up in a spire around this rock. Due to its privileged position one can see Gordes from miles around. The village is dominated by its church & castle perched atop the hill, an imposing edifice of stone that attracts many tourists. Once on top you can explore the fortified castle enclosing the city with its narrow streets, cafes, restaurants, shops & lovely houses. The panoramic view from top is spectacular of the mountains, the valley & the fields in the distance.

Rousillon: It is a short drive of 9 km from Gordes. Rousillon is a very pretty village located in the countryside next to the Monts de Vaucluse.

The village is considered one of the most visited apart from Gordes & is one of the most impressive villages in France. A "must see" in the Luberon situated in one of the biggest ochre deposits in the world. The village is also well known for being home to Samuel Beckett during the Second World War.

The most memorable feature of Rousillon are its magnificent red cliffs & its ochre quarries below the village. The spectacular range of colours in the curiously shaped white-red-orange rock formations is an unusual experience especially when the rays of the setting sun falls on the rocks. The red & brown shades of earth form a striking contrast to the surrounding greenery & the vivid blue of the Provençal sky. The exceptional quality of light make this a magical site & many artists have been seduced by this.



The charm of Rousillon is to leisurely stroll around the picturesque narrow alleys & squares,

explore the numerous gift shops, art galleries, cafes, restaurants, boutiques and admire the beautiful houses & charming B&B's & hotels. The colours of the houses here reflect the colours of the rocks & this creates a unique appeal quite different from the other villages, thus visiting Rousillon is absolutely delightful. The views from the top are magnificent.

On Sunday morning we drove to the market in L'Isle Sur-La-Sorgue, which is more a town than a village, located where the River Sorgue splits into two streams, the L'Isle of Sorgue sprang up. The town has become famous since the last 40 years for its the antiques. There are many Antique shops, art galleries & interior design shops. Every Sunday people from far & near throng here for the Antique & the Sunday market. More than 300 stalls line the street, the vendors selling antiques, second hand goods, side by side with fresh produce, vegetables, fruits, preserves, olive oil, honey, soaps, lavender, pottery, linen, etc. Walking along the canals you see the waters run between narrow ancient streets with little foot bridges to cross & the great water wheels full of green moss turning the waters of the river are testimony to the silk & paper industry that flourished here long ago. From here we proceeded to Fontaine de Vaucluse.

### L'Isle Sur La Sorgue

Fontaine de Vaucluse, just 7 km from L'Isle Sur la Sorgue is also one of the most visited. The village takes its name from the beautiful & mysterious spring that feeds the river Sorgue. The village is well known due to the impressive spring that is situated at the feet of a steep cliff 230 m high. The spring comes from deep underground & no one knows its depth. This gigantic source is the most powerful in France & fifth in the world. 630 million cubic metres of water flow out every year making it one of the largest springs in the world. The walk to the source is lined with souvenir shops & the river flowing on one side makes this town very beautiful & different from the other villages in the Luberon. There are lovely boutique shops, cafes & very nice restaurants. Parking can be a big hassle in the summers.



The Musee de Lavande is in Coustellet, a short drive from Sur la Sorgue. It is a warm, friendly & a unique place to visit to discover the history of lavender. It is entirely dedicated to lavender. The museum gives detailed history, the tradition and the agriculture of true lavender. Their shop "Le Chateau du Bois" introduces the many properties of the essential oil of lavender showcasing the products & cosmetics made of 100 % pure essential oil of true lavender. It was a very informative & interesting visit that told the story of Lavender. Lavender flower is the emblem of Provence. Due to its many virtues, medicinal properties, the essential oil of true lavender is the most widely used in the aromatherapy & the perfume industry.

A magical world of multi media, entrancing images & music was what awaited us in the historic site of Les Baux de Provence in the heart of the Alpilles. Located in the former limestone quarries dug out by the hands of man since the Roman era stands today Le Carrieres de Lumieres which hosts extraordinary multimedia shows which are unique in the world. Culturespaces & their media partners have created a fantastic technological audio visual where images are projected on the entire surface of the rock including the floor & the ceiling. It is a journey of visual art & music, we witnessed the show of Chagal which was a mind blowing experience.



Other small villages on the Lavender route are Sault, Mazan, Venasque, Mures & Joucas. There is a concentration of lavender fields on the high plateaux of Sault & the foot of the Mont Ventoux.

Lavender blooms around the last week of June & beginning of August it is harvested. The colour & the aroma of the lavender flowers is a heady combination not to be missed.

The closest international airport to visit the Luberon is either Marseilles or Nice. One has to hire a car as public transport is negligible. The driving distance from Marseilles airport is 1hr 30 mnts & from Nice it is 3shrs. From Paris there is the TGV train 2hrs 56 mnts to Avignon & then drive from Avignon train station to Lioux is an hour & 5 mnts. The distances from Lioux to the villages around are not more than an hour & a half.

To experience the lavender fields, the Provençal light, food & wine, best time to visit is mid June.

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