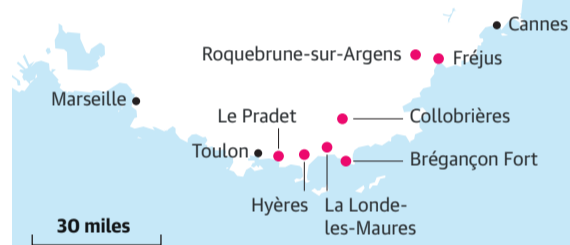


The less-visited Var region of France's Côte d'Azur is rich in hidden treasures, with glorious beaches, heritage-rich towns and bucolic vineyards

Azure like it

Words: Liz Boulter



Saint-Tropez may be known for glitz, but a few miles along the coast, the very ground beneath my feet glitters like a jet-setter hotel. I'm in the Var department in south-eastern France, where the Maures massif meets the Mediterranean and the bedrock is mica schist, a flaky stone that sparkles in the Provençal sunshine (and also makes for great wine).

This particular glitz is the only thing this quiet region has in common with better-known stretches of the Côte d'Azur. A glance at a map shows why: in much of the Riviera the railway hugs the shore, but at Saint-Raphaël it loops inland, rejoining the coast at Toulon, 60 miles away. (Some say farmers refused to sell their land in the 1860s.) No rail access has meant fewer tourists, less development and, today, an area of green hills and coast dotted with small towns and quiet, even wild, beaches.

Beaches

At the western end of this "secret" coast is the town of **Le Pradet**, with half a dozen beaches between rocky headlands. The clear waters of pebbly Plage des Oursinières are popular with kayakers and snorkellers, while Plage du Monaco, accessed down steps from

the road, is long, sandy and not too crowded even in August.

To its south is another mineral marvel, **Cap Garonne**, with a mining museum (€7/€4.50) and a glorious walk on a mile-long trail for views to the Hyères islands and Toulon harbour, plus wild orchids and carnations and yellow-and-turquoise bee-eaters in autumn.

The **Giens peninsula**, further east, has beaches on all sides, so canny locals choose according to the weather. Three-mile Almanarre on the west has white sand and shallow water, but on blowy, Mistral days it is best left to wind- and kite-surfers. The eastern beach is long, sandy and sheltered. **La Capte** is a former fishing village halfway along, whose high street offers appealing restaurants (such as Le



The vineyards at **Domaine de la Navicelle**, left, renowned for producing excellent biodynamic rosé

Bouchon), an organic cafe and a *rhumerie*, a bar specialising in rum.

The nice thing about this coast is that tourism is still not the main industry. This is particularly true of **La Londe-les-Maures**, where wine and olive oil reign in a low-key town flanked by sandy beaches, though thrice-weekly summer night-markets offer crafts, wine and hot food.

Its biggest beach is l'Argentière, now all umbrella pines and golden sand but once the site of a huge zinc mine, whose blast furnaces lined the shore. After the mines were worked out, the Schneider company built a torpedo factory here, which remained until 1993. Not until 2006 were these beaches restored to their natural glory.

At Argentière's eastern end things get interesting because here begins a

5½-mile coastal path linking several great beaches, the first being sandy, bosky Plage du Pellegrin. The land behind it belongs to wine estate Chateau Léoube (see below), which runs a chic feet-in-the sand restaurant in the trees behind, and charges €11 a day for parking. Or you can walk in from l'Argentière.

At the other end of the path is France's Chequers: the 13th-century **Fort de Brégançon**, on a craggy island reached by causeway, has been the French presidential retreat since 1968. François Hollande opened it to the nation in 2015, and it can be visited (guided tour €10pp) whenever Emmanuel Macron is not in residence.

Heading east, the winding D559 passes more beaches on the way to **Domaine du Rayol**, a botanical garden with plants from Mediterranean-type climates all over the world: California, South Africa, Australia and Chile. Its Café des Jardiniers has a daily changing lunch menu (amazing apricot crumble), and cute Plage du Rayol, a short walk away, is perfect for a postprandial nap.

Inland

Today, not many foreigners know **Hyères**, with its palm trees and 11th-century castle, but from the late-18th century its streets rang with





Fort de Brégançon, left, the French presidential retreat since 1968; Saint Paul's church, below, in the pretty town of Hyères



Roquebrune-sur-Argens also retains the feel of an ancient Provençal village, from its 16th-century clock tower to lunches under the plane trees of Place Perrin. It has a chocolate museum too, but the big draw is the flame-red rock after which it is named: 372 metres (1,200ft) high, it's reminiscent of Uluru. Several new hiking routes, some with ropeways, opened last year, and this is the only place in mainland France where wild Hermann's tortoises can be spotted. It's also fun to kayak under the rock to wild Lac Noirel, or paddle 8.6 miles to the sea, arriving near Fréjus at sunset for a shuttle pickup (basedurocher.com).

Vineyards

Provence is known as the rosé capital of the world, but several vineyards now offer more than the usual tour and tasting. **Domaine de la Navicelle**, near Le Pradet, makes excellent aged biodynamic rosé. Visitors can collect a basket with bread, paté, sausage, tapenade and fruit - and wine of course - and picnic with sea views

among the vines. There are live jazz evenings, a summer music festival and seven gîtes (from €370 a week) in old farm buildings.

Figuière, near La Londe, has gone one step further: for €61 each, visitors can head off on e-bikes on a steep and rocky 7.4-mile route around its organic vineyards. There's a stop for lunch on a ridge with views of sea and islands. A delectable picnic, including terrine, goat's cheese with fresh herbs, heritage tomato salad, gherkins, baguette, strawberries and wine is delivered by an all-terrain electric vehicle.

Château Léoube, where I saw soil glittery with mica, is the fanciest of the Var wine estates, with vine-clad hills and olive groves, and views of Fort de Brégançon. Tours here are on e-scooters (€50pp, with wine tasting). It's owned by the JCB family, of diggers fame, and features a Bamford lifestyle shop on site.

Stay

Much of the Var is a conservation area or *parc naturel*, which is great, but building new hotels or resorts is virtually impossible, so accommodation can be hard to find. One welcome addition is Sous les Pins, a peaceful spot just outside La Londe, with views over vines and olives to the sea. Owners Patrick and Cécile converted buildings on her parents' property, creating four gîtes, then in 2022 added four B&B rooms in a 100-year-old farmhouse (from €140 B&B). Breakfasts of local bread, cheese, ham, yoghurt and fruit are served by a new pool.

British voices each winter. This was where rich Victorians escaped the cold - it's warmer and drier than Nice. In its heyday it had 400 tourist villas and three Anglican churches. The fact that the beach was a couple of miles away wasn't a problem before sunbathing became fashionable.

Visitors included Queen Victoria and Robert Louis Stevenson, who worked on Treasure Island here. F Scott Fitzgerald edited *The Great Gatsby* here, and Edith Wharton spent her Pulitzer prize money on doing up her garden and stayed here until she died.

Hyères's grandest hotel is now an insurance office, but centuries of earlier history are written throughout the old town. Rue des Porches is a series of atmospheric archways built against one of three concentric town walls, complete with arrow slits. Buildings are in harmonious peach, pale blue, yellow and pistachio and streets overflow with colourful plumbago, bougainvillea and other flowering plants.

In a deep valley of sweet chestnut forests 20 miles east, **Collobrières** is the main town in the Maures massif, and *marrons* capital of Provence - they're available *glacés* and as ice-cream, turned into liqueur and more. Pretty riverside houses belie a hardworking history: the Réal Collobrier river, with its 12th-century

donkey bridge, once powered sawmills and cork factories. Houses on its left bank were built for workers.

Hotel des Maures (doubles from €67 B&B) makes a great base for peaceful walks, up to ruined Saint-Pons church, for example: the tourist office has maps for hikes of up to 18 miles. The hotel's restaurant terrace spans the river, and a new annexe in a former mill-owner's house has huge bedrooms and a pool.

A Festival de la Nature in May offers free telescopes for stargazing from Saint-Pons hill and free guided walks. For August's Fête des Fontaines (on this weekend), the fountain in Place de la Mairie runs with rosé (on Sunday), and traditional aioli dinners are €20. And that's before the blowout chestnut festival on three weekends in October.

Feast your eyes on this glorious selection of olives in Hyères

