



Christopher Cohen/Hotel Belle Plage

INSPIRATION

7 Cities and Towns for Discovering the Real South of France

From wine-soaked Languedoc to surf-haven Basque Country, le sud is filled to the brim with history, culture, and scenic outdoors that go well beyond the glitzy beach scenes.

BY CAITLIN RAUX GUNTHER
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“Here, we’re all about the *l’art de vivre* of the South of France,” begins Alexandre Agop, Director of Wine Tourism at Gérard Bertrand, the world-renowned winemaker. “For us, that means sharing—wine, food, art, and music.” It’s late March and I’m strolling the grounds of Bertrand’s wine resort **Château de l’Hospitalet**, in the rolling hills of Languedoc. In every direction, vineyards extend to the horizon. The air is crisp, but the sun pours down from the cloudless blue sky. Agop smiles as he opens the door to the tasting cellar, stocked with biodynamic wines from Bertrand’s 16 estates throughout the Occitanie region. Birds are chirping. We are all happy to be here.

Talk about *le sud* conjures up images of lavender fields in Provence and the glitzy beaches of Saint Tropez—and no doubt, those are destinations for good reason. But outside of that postcard version of southern France, regions like wine-soaked Languedoc and surf-haven Basque Country are brimming with culture, history, and natural vistas. Especially when coming from the mercurial city of Paris, the South of France also offers a spirit of generosity—and still plenty of excellent food and wine. Here, a guide to some of our favorite cities and towns across the South of France.

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Hôtel du Palais was commissioned by Napoleon III's wife and put the town of Biarritz on the map in the 1800s. Maité Lada-Pharisier/Hôtel du Palais Biarritz

French Basque Country

Located in the southwest corner of France, just northeast of its Spanish counterpart, French Basque Country is lush, green and mountainous. Here, you can taste the **macarons** of Saint-Jean-de-Luz; feast on a Txuleta steak washed down with barrel-poured cider at a traditional cider house; or take a lesson in shredding on one of the many mythical surf beaches.

Biarritz has been a resort town since the 1800s and the **Hôtel du Palais**, commissioned by Empress Eugenie de Montijo, wife of Napoleon III, arguably put it on the map. With views overlooking the Atlantic and the Pyrenees in the distance, the swank seaside resort reopened in June 2022 after extensive renovations. While some of the rooms (86 rooms and 56 suites) retain historic details— ceiling woodwork, Napoleon-era gold leaf, wall hangings—others offer a modern, nautical look, with deep-sea blues and porthole-shaped windows. At Hôtel du Palais, guests have access to the Imperial Spa, in partnership with Maison Guerlain and the Leonor Greyl hair institute, several restaurants run by the Michelin-star-decorated Aurelien Largeau, and the aptly named Napoleon III Bar.



Provence's lavender fields are a few hour's drive from the Cote d'Azur for a unique mix of scenery

Thomas Despeyroux/Unsplash

Provence

Part of the same administrative region as Côte d'Azur, Provence includes inland departments like the Alpes de Haute Provence and Vaucluse. Dotted with tiny towns, vineyards, olive groves, and, yes, those iconic lavender fields, it's a destination for disconnecting and finding refuge. Visit once and you'll understand why literary figures have chosen Provence as their home. American novelist, playwright and essayist [James Baldwin](#), for example, produced prolific work from his house surrounded by gardens in Saint-Paul de Vence.

Located in a small commune (population 475) of **Crillon-Le-Brave** in Vaucluse, Hotel [Crillon le Brave](#) is dedicated to the art of slowing down. The 16 rooms and 18 suites rooms look out onto views of vineyards and the mountains of Ventoux. They feature antique-y decor, a coastal-grandma-color-palette, and traditional Provençal red floor tile. With a facial treatment menu designed by Tata Harper, the Serene Spa Des Ecuries is a definite selling point. Outside of the hotel, guests can set off on a bicycle excursion, rummage through a Provençal flea market, or explore the medieval village in Crillon-le-Brave.

Between Aix en Provence and the Luberon National Park, [Chateau La Coste](#) is a star-studded collaboration. Pritzker-Prize-winning architect Jean Nouvel designed the state-of-the-art winery. Celebrated cook-by-fire proselytizer Francis Mallman opened a restaurant there in 2017. Chef Hélène Darroze has one, too. Throughout the estate, you'll find pieces from artists like Louise Bourgeois and Alexander Calder.

The 28 suites that comprise the estate's hotel, [Villa La Coste](#), are perched on a hillside, with views of the Luberon Valley and the Château La Coste domain. The style is minimal but warm, with light wood, cream tones, and floor-to-ceiling windows. Ten of the suites have private plunge pools. The Villa La Coste Spa offers a la carte treatments or half/full day programs. If you're not already convinced—breakfast is available for order all day.