

St-Tropez to Toulon



Pouting sexpot Brigitte Bardot came to St-Tropez in the '50s to star in *Et Dieu Créa la Femme* (*And God Created Woman*; 1956), with the film's stunning success changing St-Tropez overnight from peaceful fishing village into sizzling jet-set favourite. The Tropeziens have thrived on their glitzy image ever since: millionaires' yachts jostle for the €90,000-per-week moorings, and an infinite number of tourists jostle to admire them.

A battleship-grey blast of reality on this golden stretch of coast fringed by some of France's most beautiful beaches is Toulon, France's most important military port, 20km west of St-Tropez. Continuing west, the pinprick islands off its shores, dubbed the Îles du Fun (Islands of Fun), are not for Robinson Crusoe. In the 1950s pastis millionaire Paul Ricard transformed them into concrete playgrounds, to the joy of many a less-discerning, fun-in-the-sun-seeking tourist.

Between these two towns, fine-sand beaches of buttercream yellow and gold abound: at St-Tropez's 9km-long Plage de Pampelonne; the quiet white coves of Cavalaire-sur-Mer, Le Rayol, Cavalière and Aiguebelle; the resort of Le Lavandou; and La Capte, near pretty palm tree-lined Hyères, a launch pad for day trips to the golden Îles d'Hyères.

Inland, the wild and heavily forested Massif des Maures sprawls west, a hushed, whispering retreat from the crazy Côte d'Azur. Walking and cycling trails radiate around chestnut-sweet Collobrières while further north, around Draguignan, unfolds a maze of solitary hilltop villages with fortified gateways leading to tiny winding streets and sleepy squares.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Star-spot, drink and dance 'til dawn at the beach legends of sexy **St-Tropez** (see the boxed text, p346)
- Take a dramatic cape-to-cape walk around the coast on the **St-Tropez peninsula** (p353)
- Revel in endless sun, sea and sand on the shining islands of the **Îles d'Hyères** (p366)
- Snorkel in clear-blue waters and roam a Mediterranean plant-filled paradise at the **Domaine du Rayol** (p364)
- Lose yourself inside the peace, tranquility and natural beauty of the village-studded **Haut-Var** (p358)
- Discover the region's **vineyards** (see the boxed text, p373) by pedal power around La Londe
- Gorge out on candied chestnuts in **Collobrières** (p360), black truffles in **Aups** (p358) and Côtes de Provence wines in **Les Arcs-sur-Argens** (p359)



ITINERARIES

BEACH BUM

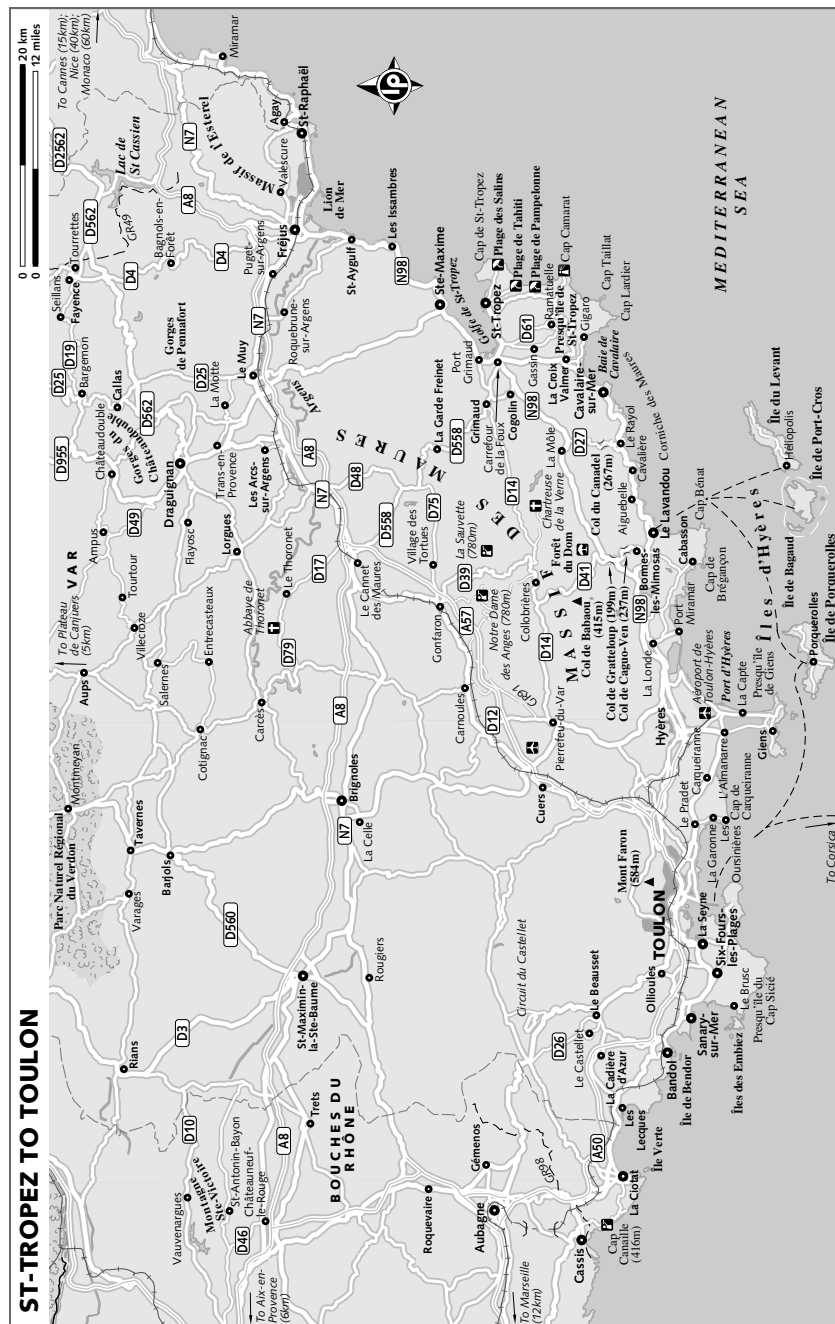
The fine golden sand beaches on this privileged neck of the coast are the Riviera's finest. Start day one in **St-Tropez** (1; p341) with a prebreakfast mooch around the **Place des Lices Market** (p350), followed by a coffee and croissant at Sartre's **Sénequier** (p350). Dynamos can trade in the market meander for an invigorating 12km stroll along St-Tropez's **coastal path** (p346) to **Plage de Tahiti** (2; p345), but authentic beach bums can drive. From here, don your best bikini and leg it south to **Plage de Pampelonne** (3; p345) in time for an apéritif at **Le Club 55** (see the boxed text, p346) before a sushi lunch at **Kaï Largo** (see the boxed text, p346); find both midway along Pampelonne's divinely sandy 5km-long stretch. Spend the afternoon flopped out on a decadently thick mattress, champagne bucket à côté, at **Nikki Beach** (see the boxed text, p346). Come dusk, motor through vineyards to **Plage de Gigaro** (4; p353), where **Couleurs du Jardin** (p354) beckons for dinner overlooking the Med. For dance-till-dawn types, the party rages at **La Voile Rouge** (see the boxed text, p346).

Day two, abandon St-Tropez for an island. The curvaceous coastal road to Le Lavandou glides past extraordinary sea gardens at the **Domaine du Rayol** (5; p364). Snorkel here then continue southwest to **Chez Jo** (see the boxed text, p365) for *bouillabaisse* (fish stew; order 24 hours in advance) on the beach at noon and swimming in the nude. After lunch, catch a boat from **Le Lavandou** (6; p365) to **Île de Port-Cros** (7; p369) for an afternoon of gentle walking, or **Île de Porquerolles** (8; p366) for scenic cycling beach-to-beach.



ST-TROPEZ TO TOULON

THUMB TAB



17th-century citadel in the northeast. Yachts like spaceships moor in the old port alongside quai Suffren. The main car park, Parking du Port, is across from the bus station at the Nouveau Port (New Port).

Information

BOOKSHOPS

Librairie du Port (quai Suffren) Newspapers, mags and guidebooks in English.

EMERGENCY

Police station (☎ 04 94 12 70 00; rue François Sibilli)

INTERNET ACCESS

Kreatik Cafe (☎ 04 94 97 40 61; www.kreatik.com; 19 av du Général Leclerc; 1st 10min €2, then per 30min/1hr €4/7; ☎ noon-12.30am Mon, 9.30am-12.30am Tue-Sun)

LAUNDRY

Laverie du Pin (13 quai de l'Épi; per 5.5/16.5kg wash €5.50/13; ☎ 9am-7pm)

MEDICAL SERVICES

Pharmacie du Port (☎ 04 94 97 00 06; 9 quai Suffren; ☎ 8.30am-8.30pm Mon-Sat)

Pôle de Santé (☎ 04 98 12 50 00) Hospital in Gassin, 11km from St-Tropez.

SOS Médecins (☎ 04 94 97 65 65) Emergency medical care.

MONEY

Change Cambio (☎ 04 94 97 80 70; 18 rue Allard; ☎ 9.15am-10pm, shorter hr low season) Charges 3% commission to change travellers cheques; at the Vieux Port.

POST

Post office (place Alphonse Celli)

TOURIST INFORMATION

Tourist office (☎ 04 94 97 45 21; www.ot-saint-tropez.com; quai Jean Jaurès; ☎ 9.30am-8.30pm Jul & Aug, 9.30am-12.30pm & 2-7pm Apr-Jun, Sep & Oct, 9.30am-12.30pm & 2-6pm Nov-Mar, closed Sun Jan & Nov)

Sights & Activities

Weaving your way through the history-laden old city streets is the best way to get a feel for the town's timeless traditions and culture. Start at the **Vieux Port**, the heart of Tropezien life, where a **statue of the Bailli de Suffren** (quai Suffren) cast from a 19th-century cannon peers out to sea. The bailiff (1729–88) was a sailor who fought with a Tropezien crew against Britain and Prussia during the Seven Years' War.

Shrug off the hectic hustle of the port in the charming old fishing quarter of **La Ponche**, northeast of the Vieux Port. From quai Suffren, walk to the northern end of its continuations, quai Jean Jaurès and quai Frédéric Mistral, and at 15th-century **Tour du Portalet**, turn right (east) to the sandy fishing cove. From here, a coastal path (p346) snakes around the peninsula.

From the southern end of quai Frédéric Mistral, place Garrezio sprawls east from 10th-century **Tour Suffren** to place de l'Hôtel de Ville. From here, rue Guichard leads south-east to sweet-chiming **Église de St-Tropez** (place de l'Ormeau), a quintessential St-Trop landmark built in 1785 in Italian baroque style. Inside is the bust of St Torpes, honoured during Les Bravades des Espagnols (p347). Follow rue de Portail Neuf south to **Chapelle de la Miséricorde** (rue de la Miséricorde), built in 1645 with a pretty bell tower and colourful tiled dome.

A block south is legendary **place des Lices**, St-Tropez's loveliest square, studded with plane trees, cafés and (when the market's not on) *pétanque* players. **Chapelle du Couvent** (av Augustin Grangeon) dating from 1757 and **Chapelle Ste-Anne** (av Augustin Grangeon), built in 1618, sit south of here. The marvellous collection of ex-votive paintings and centuries-old miniature boats inside the latter can be viewed just once a year – on St Anne's feast day (26 July).

CITADEL

A 17th-century **citadel** dominates the hillside overlooking St-Tropez to the east. The views (and peacocks!) are great, and its dungeons shelter a **Musée Naval** (☎ 04 94 97 59 43; adult/under 18yr €5.50/free; ☎ 10am-6.30pm), dedicated to the town's maritime history and the Allied landings in August 1944.

MUSÉE DE L'ANNONCIADE

In a gracefully converted 16th-century chapel at the Vieux Port, this famous **art museum** (☎ 04 94 97 04 01; place Georges Grammont; adult/under 12yr €5.50/free; ☎ 10am-1pm & 3-7pm Jul-Sep, 10am-noon & 2-6pm Wed-Mon Oct & Dec-Jun) showcases an impressive collection of modern art infused with the famous Côte d'Azur light. It's also a great opportunity to understand what it was about St-Tropez that captivated so many of these painters: the pointillist collection on the 2nd floor includes Signac's *St-Tropez*, *L'Orage* (1895), *St-Tropez*, *Le Quai* (1899) and *St-Tropez*, *Le Sentier Côtier* (1901). Artists



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such as Vuillard, Bonnard, Maurice Denis and Valloton (the self-named Nabis group) have a room to themselves, and there are wild works by the Fauvists: Matisse spent the summer of 1904 in St-Tropez, starting preliminary studies for *Luxe, Calme et Volupté*. Cubists George Braque and Picasso are also represented.

Summer art exhibitions fill the 19th-century **Lavoir Vasserot** (rue Joseph Quaranta; admission free; ☎ variable), the former communal wash-house.

LA MAISON DES PAPILLONS

Around 4500 butterflies collected by Dany Lartigue, son of Riviera photographer Jacques Henri Lartigue (1894–1986), are pinned to the walls in **La Maison des Papillons** (☎ 04 94 97 63 45; 9 rue Étienne Bery; adult/under 8yr €3/free; ☎ 2.30–6pm Mon–Sat Apr–Oct). Find the House of Butterflies in the former home of Madeleine 'Bibi' Messenger, the first wife of Jacques Lartigue (he had three), who remained in St-Tropez after the couple split.

BEACHES

About 4km southeast of town is the start of the magnificent sandy **Plage de Tahiti**, and its

continuation, **Plage de Pampelonne**, studded with some of St-Tropez's most legendary drinking and dining haunts (see the boxed text, p346). To get to here on foot, head out of town along av de la Résistance (south of place des Lices) to rte de la Belle Isnarde and then rte de Tahiti. Otherwise, the bus to Ramatuelle runs about 1km inland along the D93 – from which seven roads lead to the sand.

Closer to St-Tropez, **Plage des Salins** is a long, wide sandy beach 4.5km east of town at the southern foot of Cap des Salins. To get here,

A HEADLESS HERO

A grisly legend provided St-Tropez with its name in AD 68. After beheading a Roman officer named Torpes for becoming a Christian, the emperor Nero packed the decapitated body into a small boat, along with a dog and a rooster who were to devour his remains. Miraculously, the body came ashore in St-Tropez un nibbled, and the village adopted the headless Torpes as its saint.

follow rte des Salins to its end. On the way you'll pass **La Treille Muscate** (Wine Trellis), a rambling villa framed with red-ochre columns wrapped in honeysuckle. Here in 1927 Colette wrote *La Naissance du Jour* (Break of Day), which evokes a 1920s unspoilt St-Tropez. She left town in 1938.

At the northern end of Plage des Salins, on a rock jutting out to sea, is the **tomb of Émile Olivier** (1825–1913), who served as first minister to Napoleon III until his exile in 1870. Olivier's 17-volume *L'Empire Libéral* is preserved in the library of **Château La Moutte**, his former home on Cap des Salins, where musical concerts are held in summer. Its unmarked entrance is on chemin de la Moutte.

Olivier's sea-facing tomb looks out towards **La Tête de Chien** (Dog's Head), named after the legendary dog who declined to eat St Torpes' remains. Further south, **Pointe du Capon** is a beautiful cape crisscrossed with walking trails.

Bathers can swim in the buff on aptly named **Plage de la Liberté**, a nudist beach on Pampel-

onne's northern end; **Plage de la Moutte** on Cap des Salins; or the more secluded **Plage de l'Escalet**, on the southern side of Cap Camarat.

COASTAL WALKS

A scenic coastal path wends its way past rocky outcrops and hidden bays 35km south from St-Tropez, around the Presqu'île de St-Tropez to the beach at Cavalaire-sur-Mer and beyond to Le Lavandou (60km).

In St-Tropez the coastal path, flagged with a yellow marker, starts at **La Ponche**, immediately east of Tour du Portalet at the northern end of quai Frédéric Mistral. From here, trails lead to Baie des Cannebiens (2.7km), La Moutte (7.4km), Plage des Salins (8.5km) and Plage de Tahiti (12km).

Alternatively, drive to the end of rte des Salins, from where it is a shorter walk along the coastal path to Plage de Tahiti (2.7km) and nudist Plage de la Moutte (1.7km) on Cap des Salins.

Ramatuelle **tourist office** (☎ 04 98 12 64 00; www.ramatuelle-tourisme.com in French; place de l'Ormeau) organises *balades nature* (guided nature walks)

TOP FIVE BEACH LEGENDS

Frolic like a sand star at St-Tropez's trendiest beach haunts on (where else?) Plage de Pampelonne:

- **Le Club 55** (☎ 04 94 55 55 55; www.leclub55.com; 43 blvd Patch; meals €50; ☎ lunch Mar–mid-Nov) What started out as a simple canteen for the crew of *And God Created Woman* in the 1950s is now the hippest joint on the beach. Dine at tightly packed tables beneath sails strung from trees, drink from plump white sofas on the sand, and be a beach bum on a white cushioned mattress (€16 per day) beneath umbrella (€8 per day) or hip *pailote* (a smart straw shack; €20 a day) on the designer beach. Rumbling tummies with no reservation can opt for a salad or sandwich (€10 to €15) at the twig-topped beach bar nearer the water.
- **La Voile Rouge** (Red Sail; ☎ 04 94 79 84 34; rte des Tamaris; ☎ Apr–Sep) Parts of *And God Created Woman* were filmed here followed by the first sightings of topless bathers and later the g-string bikini. The beach club remains hot stuff come dusk today – champagne à gogo, cocktails, dancing on tables and DJ mixes (buy the CD). Find it at the northern end of Pampelonne on Mooréa Plage. No credit cards.
- **Nikki Beach** (☎ 04 94 79 82 04; www.nikkibeach.com; rte de l'Épi; meals €45–90; ☎ noon–9pm Mon–Thu, noon–1am Fri–Sun May–Sep) Bums are extremely well cushioned at this OTT lap of designer luxury: think king-sized cream mattresses on the sand or up top in colonial-style sun shacks. The bar is hot, there's pool-side service and smart table dining. Feel the vibe at www.nikkinews.com.
- **Millesim Beach** (☎ 04 94 97 20 99; www.millesim.net; rte de Tahiti; starters/mains €15/25; ☎ lunch & dinner Jul & Aug, Thu–Tue low season) One of the few to open year-round, this contemporary beach club pampers guests with massages (€70 to €90), manicures (€35) and other Zen relaxants. Cuisine is typically Mediterranean.
- **Kaï Largo** (☎ 04 98 12 63 12; www.kailargo.com; 17 blvd Patch; meals €45–80; ☎ lunch & dinner late Jun–Aug, lunch Apr, May & Sep) Flit to Asia at this oasis of exoticism on the sand. Cuisine is a tasty cross of Thai and Indonesian; July and August usher in a sushi bar and the fixtures'n'fittings are predominantly rattan.

to Cap Camarat, Cap Taillat and elsewhere on the peninsula; see p352.

WATER SPORTS

Discover the underworld of St-Tropez with diving schools **Octopussy** (☎ 06 10 25 61 26; www.octopussy.fr; ☎ Apr–Nov), which has a kiosk in the Parking du Port car park at the Nouveau Port; and **European Diving School** (☎ 04 94 79 90 37; www.europeandiving.com; rte des Plages; ☎ mid–Mar–Oct), which is at the Kon Tiki camp site. One/six/12 dives cost €40/220/390, plus equipment charge.

At the northern end of Pampelonne at La Voile Rouge, **Bill Aout Sports** (☎ 06 12 75 11 03) rents out canoes/pedalos/wind surfers for €10/13/13 an hour.

BOAT EXCURSIONS

Boat trips around the glamorous Baie des Cannebiens (dubbed the 'Bay of Stars' after the many celebrity villas dotting the coast) are advertised on boards along quai Suffren: **La Pouncho** (☎ 06 84 07 41 87; www.lapouncho.com; adult/4–10yr €8/4) runs four or five one-hour trips a day around the bay, March to October.

From April to September **Les Bateaux Verts** (☎ 04 94 49 29 39; www.bateauxverts.com) runs various trips departing from quai Jean Jaurès at the Vieux Port including around the Baie des Cannebiens (adult/four to 12 years €8.50/4.50), Calanques de l'Estérel (€16.90/10.20); Caps Camarat, Taillat and Lardier (€16.90/10.20); Cannes (€29/18.50); Îles de Lérins (€29/18.50); Port-Cros (€29/18.50) and Porquerolles (€33/21). The same company also runs shuttle boats between St-Tropez, St-Raphaël, Ste-Maxime and Port Grimaud; see p351 for details.

Excursions Maritimes St-Tropez (EMT; ☎ 04 94 54 53 54; www.emt-golfe-st-tropez.fr) runs weekly trips departing from the *embarcadère*, accessed from Parking du Port, at the Nouveau Port: Caps Camarat, Taillat and Lardier (three hours, adult/child four to 12 years €19/12.50); and Port-Cros and Porquerolles in a day (€36.50/26.50).

Tours

The tourist office (p343) organises 1½- to two-hour **guided walking tours** (adult/under 12yr €2.50/free; ☎ 10.30am Wed Apr–Oct) in French; call to check departure times and to see if an English-speaking guide is available.

Festivals & Events

Guns blaze and flags flutter on 15 June during **Les Bravades des Espagnols**, a festival celebrating St-

Tropez's victory over 21 Spanish galleons that attacked the port on 15 June 1637. The colourful processions are led by the town captain.

Celebrated since 1558, the **bravades** (Provençal for 'bravery') on 16, 17 (St Torpes' day) and 18 May see Tropeziens turn out in traditional costume to watch the *capitaine de ville* and an ear-splitting army of 140 musket-firing *bravadeurs* parade through the street carrying a bust of the town's saint.

Sleeping

Seeking a room and breakfast with vineyard view? Head out of town onto the peninsula (p353).

BUDGET

Hôtel La Méditerranée (☎ 04 94 97 00 44; www.hotel-mediterranee.org; 21 blvd Louis Blanc; s/d from €50/90; ☎) Get in quick at this old-fashioned, mildly tatty place that needs a face-lift. There is no reception; just head for the bar or courtyard restaurant out the back beneath the trees (mains €16 to €20). Opening hours for both are erratic.

MIDRANGE

Hôtel Lou Cagnard (☎ 04 94 97 04 24; www.hotel-lou-cagnard.com; 18 av Paul Roussel; d low/high season from €48/60; ☎ Jan–Oct; ☎) That thing of miracles, a decently priced St-Tropez hotel. In an old Provençal house, rooms aren't fancy but they're clean and light, and there's a jasmine-scented old courtyard garden.

Baron Lodge (☎ 04 94 97 06 57; www.hotel-le-baron.com; 23 rue de l'Aïoli; d low/high season from €50/80; ☎) At the foot of the citadel, the Baron is a unpretentious sort of guy with a clutch of comfy rooms touting sea views or glimpses of the citadel. The best rooms (from €85/115) have a balcony or terrace.

Hôtel Sube (☎ 04 94 97 30 04; www.hotel-sube.com; quai Suffren; d low/high season from €70/90, with sea view €190/290; ☎) Tucked upstairs in an arcade behind the Bailli de Suffren statue, this place is overwhelmingly maritime in spirit. Exquisite wooden sailing boats and nautical knick-knacks decorate public areas, and the bar-restaurant terrace provides an elite eagle's-eye view of the port antics.

Hôtel Playa (☎ 04 98 12 94 44; www.playahotelst-tropez.com; 57 rue Allard; d low/high season from €90/128; ☎) A young upstart among the town's list of venerable old hotels, Le Playa still has the unsullied shininess of a brand-new car. Its central rooms are simple but smart, but its

best feature is its glass-roofed, palm-filled patio, which doubles as art exhibition space. Luggage fiends note: no lift.

Hôtel Les Palmiers (☎ 04 94 97 01 61; www.hotel-les-palmiers.com; 24-26 blvd Vasserot; d low/high season from €80/102; (P) (☺) (♿)) Crisp, no-nonsense décor and a pleasant courtyard, complete with orange trees and sun-lounges, make this hotel a good spot to stay. It's also very central, with prime views of place des Lices' *pétanque* players from rooms overlooking the square.

TOP END

Le Mas de Chastelas (☎ 04 94 56 71 71; www.chastelas.com; quartier Bertaud; d low/mid/high season from €150/240/320; (P) (☺) (♿)) Guests risk never getting further than the grounds – a luxuriant orgy of flowers and pools – at this beautiful farmhouse hotel bathed in a sea of vines. The mood is classical 18th-century Provence and furnishings are period. Find it a healthy stride away from the humdrum of Tropezien life, signposted off the D98 leading into town.

La Maison Blanche (☎ 04 94 97 52 66; www.hotel-lamaisonblanche.com; place des Lices; d low/mid/high season from €190/230/270, ste from €350/450/550; (P) (☺) (♿)) Design is everything at this cool and elegant town house with a beautiful interior courtyard-turned-summer garden and evening champagne bar that creates an oasis of peace between the hotel and hubbub of St-Tropez's buzzing market-clad square. At the White House, fresh white flowers, wood and natural hues predominate and room No 7 is the star pick.

Hôtel La Mistralée (☎ 04 98 12 91 12; www.hotel-mistralee.com; 1 av du Général Leclerc; d low/mid/high season from €190/330/460; (P) (☺) (♿)) Decorative stained glass, moulded ceilings, marbled floors and other carefully preserved, original 19th-century features are the trademark of this flamboyant 10-room boutique hotel slumbering in the smart town house (1850) where hairdresser to the stars, Alexandre (famously sans surname), lived. Rooms are thematic and range from Chinese and Moroccan to Chanel and Tarzan. Breakfast is served in the glass-paned winter garden or by the mosaic pool.

Le Yaca (☎ 04 94 55 81 00; www.hotel-le-yaca.fr; 1 blvd d'Aumale; d low/mid/high season from €270/335/350; ☺ mid-Apr–mid-Oct; (P) (☺) (♿)) Utterly without blemish, Le Yaca – a hotel since 1948 – is hushed and understatedly elegant, with a gorgeous courtyard garden and staff so discreet it's like being waited on by charmingly

mannered poltergeists. Colette lived in the early-18th-century town house in 1927 and Orson Welles, Errol Flynn and Greta Garbo all stayed here at varying times.

Hôtel Byblos (☎ 04 94 56 68 00; www.byblos.com; av Paul Signac; d low/high season from €290/330; ☺ mid-Apr–early Oct; (P) (☺) (♿)) It's been the *crème de la crème* of Riviera accommodation for the Paris jet set, movie moguls and superstars since 1967 – and remains elusively exclusive. Pure luxury shrouds its gourmet restaurant (opposite) and nightclub (p351). Parking €30.

Eating

You're dead right: there aren't many greasy spoons in St-Tropez. Café and restaurant prices are, in fact, higher than elsewhere on the coast; the glamour dust sprinkled on fish and chips doesn't come cheap!

Don't leave town without sampling a creamy *tarte Tropézienne*, a decadent sponge cake sandwich filled with custard cream and topped with sugar.

RESTAURANTS

Quai Jean Jaurès is lined with restaurants tout-€25 *menus* and a strategic view of the yacht brigade's silverware and champagne. At the northern end of rue des Remparts in the old town, there's a lesser-known cluster of places overlooking Port des Pêcheurs at La Ponche.

Le Petit Charron (☎ 04 94 97 73 78; 6 rue des Charrons; starter/main/dessert from €12/18/8; ☺ dinner Mon–Sat) Sautéed veal with sage or *pintade rôtie à la crème d'ail* (in a garlicky cream sauce) topped off by fig tart are among the classical French dishes served with a refined flourish at this lovely old-town inn.

La Table du Marché (☎ 04 94 97 85 20; www.christophe-leroy.com; 38 rue Georges Clemenceau; menus €18 & €26; ☺ lunch & dinner) With sister 'market tables' in Alpine ski resort Avoriaz and Marrakech, this simple (for St-Trop) yet stylish bistro is something of a success story. Should you want to learn the secrets behind Christophe Leroy's market-driven cuisine, sign up for a session in his *atelier de cuisine* (see the boxed text, p52). Die-hard enthusiasts can also dine at Leroy's Les Moulins de Ramatuelle (p353).

Salama (☎ 04 94 97 59 62; 1 rue des Tisserands; couscous €19–28, mains €22; ☺ dinner Mon–Sun) The smell of cooking wafting down the alley outside Salama is enough to lure you into this hip Moroccan den where St-Tropez's trendiest hang out over cosy exotic furnishings and fresh mint tea.

Café Sud (☎ 04 94 97 42 52; 12 rue Étienne Berny; plat du jour & starter/dessert €20/18; ☺ lunch & dinner May–Oct) French and Italian-inspired cuisine including all things fishy, a fabulous fish risotto and imaginative vegetarian dishes like veg salad with celery ice cream are the order of the day at this tasteful restaurant set in a vine-covered courtyard. Its other restaurant, La Plage des Jumeaux, offers white tablecloth dining on Pampelonne beach (p352).

Grand Joseph (☎ 04 94 97 01 66; www.joseph-saint-tropez.com; 1 place de l'Hôtel de Ville; lunch menu/buffet €18/20, starter/pasta/main €25/28/40; ☺ lunch & dinner) Black leather chairs, white tablecloths and steel touches create a cutting-edge feel to this drinking-dining space for St-Tropez beauties. Cuisine is French gastronomic, atmosphere is lounge bar and 'two chefs, two menus' is the buzz: around the corner Petit Joseph (☎ 04 94 97 03 90), at 6 rue Sibille, cooks Asian.

Chez Fuchs (☎ 04 94 97 01 25; 7 rue des Commerçants; menu €35; ☺ lunch & dinner mid-Feb–mid-Jan) This casual, unpretentious bar-restaurant is a truly authentic family-run affair where noisy, happy Tropeziens hang out. It's notable for the massive range of cigars it sells, and for its carefully prepared traditional dishes: stuffed courgettes, artichokes *à la barigoule* (traditional Provençal dish of artichokes braised in a tangy white wine broth) and seafood. It positively heaves – book ahead.

MY ST-TROPEZ

Toulouse-born Nathalie Duchayne fell in love with St-Tropez in 1980, returned four years later to open a small beach restaurant, and in the mid-1990s (following the death of her husband in a car accident) the stunningly elegant entrepreneur switched to art. Her gallery, **Galerie Nathalie Duchayne** (☎ 04 94 97 54 50; www.duchayne.com; 2 rue de la Résistance), is now among France's leading galleries.

'For me St-Tropez is all about the people. Having raised three children here, I feel more St-Tropezien than Toulousian. Many of the same people I knew in my restaurant days are my friends now; they've been very loyal.

'Many forget that St-Tropez was once a place only for artists and intellectuals from St-Germain des Prés, real artists who led a very bohemian lifestyle, slept anywhere, all in one flat, shared workshops. It was not a competition before. Now it's very individual, very commercial. It's changed enormously.

'The artists at the old port are part of the city, and there are some incredible personalities. It is a show every day. One painter is an Indian one day, a captain another day; he's very funny and is honest about what he does. It's important to have a place for everybody. If you don't like it, you can always shut your eyes.

'In the evening I like to eat at Salama (opposite) very much and **Au Caprice des Deux** (☎ 04 94 97 76 78; www.aucapricedesdeux.com; 40 rue du Portail Neuf). The other day I went to a tiny restaurant on the beach and it was just like before, with little fairy lights and six tables, very simple. When St-Tropez gets too full I go there.'

Auberge des Maures (☎ 04 94 97 01 50; 4 rue du Docteur Boutin; menu €45; ☺ dinner mid-Feb–Nov) The oldest restaurant in town, this favourite serves traditional French cuisine in a quaint Provençal décor (including leafy courtyard). Or opt for the *carte barbecue* – a choice of fish and meats, including tapenade-stuffed shoulder of lamb and honey-caramelised veal shank (both €57 for two).

Spoon Byblos (☎ 04 94 56 68 20; www.spoon.tm.fr; Hôtel Byblos, av du Maréchal Foch; à la carte starter, main & dessert around €70; ☺ dinner Fri–Tue) Take your taste buds on a 'grand tour' of the world with Alain Ducasse, following the numbered columns on the menu horizontally for the chef's hot choice or zigzagging to create the culinary unthinkable. Décor is minimal, forks have four prongs, and the cuisine is beyond reproach.

CAFÉS

Le Café (☎ 04 94 97 44 69; www.lecafe.fr; place des Lices; menus €30 & €39; ☺ lunch & dinner) Artists and intellectuals have been meeting in St-Tropez's most famous café (originally called Café des Arts) for years. Aspiring *pétanque* players can borrow *boules* from the bar and join the square's illustrious ball-chuckers. Don't confuse this place with the newer, red-canopied Café des Arts on the corner.

Le Bistrot (☎ 04 94 97 11 33; www.bistrot-saint-tropez.com in French; place des Lices; salads €9–11, lunch menu

€14; ☺ lunch & dinner) A few doors down from Le Café, the Bistro offers all-day dining in a contemporary décor overlooking St-Tropez's busy central square. Fish and shellfish are a gastronomic feature, alongside straightforward hole-filling salads and *tartines* (toast topped with various toppings).

Sénequier (☎ 04 94 97 00 90; quai Jean Jaurès; ☺ 7am-7pm) Sartre wrote parts of *Les Chemins de la Liberté* (Roads to Freedom) at this portside café and hot spot with boaties, in business since 1887. Flop around pillar box-red tables and directors chairs on its terrace and watch the world razz by. Breakfast starts at 7.30am.

Le Gorille (☎ 04 94 97 03 93; www.legorille.com; 1 quai Suffren; ☺ 7am-4am) Another eminent portside bistro, the Gorilla gets its name from its previous owner, the short, muscular and apparently very hairy Henri Guérin! Stop here for a typically French/special/English breakfast (€7.50/10/14) or a postclubbing *croque monsieur* (toasted ham-and-cheese sandwich) and fries (€11.50).

SELF-CATERING

A morning **fish market** (place aux Herbes; ☺ daily summer, Tue-Sun winter) packs out the archway behind the tourist office, while the massive **place des Lices Market** (place des Lices; ☺ 8am-1pm Tue & Sat) – a jam-packed kaleidoscope of everything from fruit and veg to antique mirrors and slippers – is legendary (as the horrendous traffic coming into town on these days attests!).

MY ST-TROPEZ

Origami sailing boats are the forte of Hungarian-born artist Ivan Hov who fled Budapest for Paris in 1956 and studied art in the capital before moving to St-Tropez in 1968. Today, it is hundreds of tableaux – monumental to minuscule in size and featuring at least one (but invariably thousands) of his signature paper boats – that reflect his life. View them (or buy them – his works sell from anywhere between €20 for a pint-sized piece to €37,800 for a wall-sized work) at his twist of workshops, **Atelier Ivan Hov** (☎ 06 11 80 12 42; www.ivanhov.com; 20 rue des Remparts & 40 rue Gambetta).

'My work in general is a joy, a pleasure. The day an artist is inspired first by money, he's finished.

To experience true village life you have to live in it. When I arrived in 1968 I lived right in the heart of the village and loved it. It was like Saturday evening in St-Germain des Prés all the time. But now I live 2.5km out of town, in the countryside. We have a little garden, a rabbit, fish. St-Tropez in 1968 was very different to now. Its not the houses, the village, that has changed that much; it's the mentality.

I eat simply. There is a little pizzeria I discovered only recently and from its terrace, just two steps from port, you raise your head and wow, you see Chapelle Ste-Anne. The place is simple, convivial, friendly, but this view from the terrace is absolutely incredible. It's called **La Tonnelle** (☎ 04 94 54 82 02; Passage Gambetta), off rue Gambetta.'

La Tarte Tropicienne (☎ 04 94 97 19 77; www.tarte-tropicienne.com in French; 9 blvd Louis Blanc & 36 rue Georges Clemenceau) Bakery selling the traditional cream-filled sandwich cake created by *boulanger* (baker) Micka in Cogolin in 1955. Fresh sandwiches, too.

Supermarkets:

Monoprix (9 av du Général Lederc; ☺ 8am-8.20pm Mon-Sat)

Petit Casino (av du Général Lederc; ☺ 8am-12.30pm & 3.30-7pm Mon-Sat, 9am-12.30pm & 4-7pm Sun)

Spar (place Georges Clemenceau; ☺ 7.30am-7.30pm Mon-Sat, 9am-7.30pm Sun)

Drinking

St-Tropez's most quintessential cafés (p349) are prime drinking venues, as are the hottest spots on the beach (see the boxed text, p346).

Other bars worth a drink include **Chez Nano** (☎ 04 94 97 72 59; 2 rue Sibille), a high-flyer cabaret bar best known for its raspberry champagne; and **La Piscine** (Swimming Pool; ☎ 04 94 56 51 10; rue Grenouillère), a stark white lounge bar with food.

Entertainment

Clubs open every night during the high season; weekends only September to April. Strict door codes apply; look good to get past the bouncers, pay around €20 to get in and another €15-odd a drink. St-Tropez's trendiest:

La Bodega du Papagayo (☎ 04 94 79 29 50; www.papagayobodega.com; résidence du Nouveau Port, quai

TOP FIVE UNFORGETTABLE BUYS

- A fluffy pink sweater emblazoned with a rich bitch logo for your pooch from **VIP Dog** (☎ 04 94 79 84 77; place de la Poste).
- A skimpy black bikini with 'playmate' emblazoned in pink sequins, a belt for your jeans with digital display flashing your very own personalised logo and other rebel-yell designs in the brand created by a Columbian drug dealer in a Spanish jail from **De Puta Madre 69** (☎ 06 24 86 61 39; www.deputamadre69.com; Résidence du Port), next to Papagayo.
- A T-shirt starring your portrait in Swarovski crystals (€690), a pair of Dupontreué jeans with a crystal-studded parrot down one leg (€800) or a crocodile-skin bikini by fashion designer **Vincent Dupontreué** (☎ 04 94 44 46 87; 38 rue Seillon).
- Jeans with a 'cherry time' label (€110) from the St-Tropez boutique with the most disconcerting entrance (no, you won't get wet): **Le Temps des Cerises** (☎ 04 94 97 32 58; 1 rue Sibille).
- A giant Provençal urn way too big for any suitcase, or another piece of clay craftsmanship, from **Poterie Augier** (☎ 04 94 97 12 55; 19 rue Georges Clemenceau).

Bouchard; menus €25 & €50) Voguish restaurant, nightclub and terrace rolled into one at the Vieux Port.

Le Pigeonnier (☎ 04 94 97 84 26; 13 rue de la Ponche) The least flash with a '*tenué intelligemment négligée*' (trendy casual) dress code.

Les Caves du Roy (☎ 04 94 97 16 02; www.byblos.com; av du Maréchal Foch; ☺ Apr-Oct) 'Beautiful people, Hype, Select' is the strapline: boogie with resident DJ Jack E and celebrities at this legendary club inside Hôtel Byblos.

L'Esquinade (☎ 04 94 97 87 45; 2 rue du Four) Hot, heaving and gay-friendly stuff in the old fishing quarter.

VIP Room (☎ 04 94 97 14 70; www.viproom.fr; av

du 11 Novembre 1918) Club at the Nouveau Port, New

York-loft style, around for aeons and still VIP-hot.

Shopping

St-Tropez is loaded with voguish boutiques, gourmet food shops and galleries overflowing with bad art. Pick up secondhand designer fashion at **Le Dépôt** (☎ 04 94 97 80 10; 24 blvd Louis Blanc).

Traditional Tropicienne sandals, supposedly inspired by a simple leather pair brought by Colette from Greece to show her cobbler, are all part of the St-Tropez myth. Buy a pair for €94 at **Atelier Rondini** (☎ 04 94 97 19 55; 16 rue Georges Clemenceau), where the strappy footwear has been crafted since 1927; or at **K Jacques** (☎ 04 94 54 83 63, 04 94 97 41 50; www.kjacques.com; 25 rue Allard & 16 rue Seillon), where the family has cobbled since 1933.

Among the plethora of art galleries to visit, Galerie Nathalie Duchayne (see the boxed text, p349) and **Galerie des Lices** (☎ 04 94 97 87 19; www.galeriedeslices.com; 20 blvd Louis Blanc) are outstanding.

Getting There & Away

AIR

The closest airport is **Aéroport International St-Tropez-La Môle** (☎ 04 94 54 76 40; www.st-tropez-airport.com in French), 15km southwest of St-Tropez on the westbound N98 in La Môle. The only scheduled flights are to/from Geneva (May to October) with Swiss budget airline Fly Baboo. Helicopter company **MBH Azur** (☎ 04 50 92 78 00; www.mbh.fr) also lands here.

BOAT

From April to early October, Les Bateaux Verts (see p347) runs shuttleboats to/from Port Grimaud (single/return €6/10.50, 20 minutes, eight to 12 daily). Shuttles to/from Les Issambres (single/return €7/12.50, 20 minutes, eight or nine daily) sail from mid-June to early September, and boats to/from Ste-Maxime (single/return €6.30/11.50, 30 minutes, hourly) sail year-round. Boats depart from the pier off quai Jean Jaurès at the Vieux Port; buy tickets five minutes before departure at the kiosk.

Transports Maritimes Raphaëlois (☎ 04 94 95 17 46; www.tmr-saintraphael.com) runs two to six boats daily from St-Tropez to St-Raphaël (adult/two to nine years same-day return €16/8) April to August, and twice-weekly boats in September and October. Boats depart from the Nouveau Port.

See p372 for boats to/from Porquerolles and Port-Cros.

BUS

From the **bus station** (☎ 04 94 97 88 51; av du Général de Gaulle; ☺ information desk 10am-noon & 2-4pm Mon-Fri,

10am-noon Sat), buses to/from Ramatuelle (€3.20, 25 minutes, four daily summer) and Gassin (€3.20, 25 minutes, four daily summer) run parallel to the coast about 1km inland.

There are also buses to/from St-Raphaël (€9.50, 1¼ hours, six to eight daily) via Grimaud and Port Grimaud (€3.50, 15 minutes), Ste-Maxime (€4.70, 40 minutes) and Fréjus (€8.70, one hour).

Buses to Toulon (€18.20, 2¼ hours, seven daily) go inland before joining the coast at Cavalaire-sur-Mer (€4.40, 30 minutes); they also stop at Le Lavandou (€10.30, one hour) and Hyères (€14.90, 1½ hours). Services are less frequent in winter.

Large pieces of luggage command an €0.80 transportation fee on most buses.

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

People who do wrong in life are made to drive to St-Tropez in high season when they die: roads in July and August are chock-a-block and parking costs at least €4 per hour at the Nouveau Port. For your own sanity, try to get here by other means.

Car-rental places:

Avis (☎ 04 94 97 03 10; av du 8 Mai 1945)

Eurocar (☎ 04 94 97 15 41; Résidence du Port, av du 11 Novembre 1918)

Hertz (☎ 04 94 55 83 00; av du 8 Mai 1945)

National Citer (☎ 04 94 54 85 19; Résidence du Port, av du 11 Novembre 1918)

Sixt (☎ 04 94 54 22 00; rue Mermoz)

Getting Around

BICYCLE & MOTORCYCLE

Rent a bicycle for €14 a day or a 50cc/125cc scooter for €35/45 a day from **Lucky Loc** (☎ 04 94 97 29 03; av du Général Lederc), across from Parking du Port. Family firm **Mas Location 2 Roues** (☎ 04 94 97 00 60; 3-5 rue Joseph Quaranta; ☹ Apr-Oct) and **Holiday Bikes** (☎ 04 94 97 09 39; www.holiday-bikes.com; 14 av du Général Lederc) charge similar rates.

TAXI

Taxi de Mer (☎ 06 09 53 15 47; 5 quartier Neuf) Boat taxi.

Taxi Rank (☎ 04 94 97 05 27; place Georges Grammont) At the Vieux Port.

THE PENINSULA

South of St-Tropez slumbers what many deem to be the Côte d'Azur at its most beautiful – a priceless oasis of peace and tranquillity laced with manicured vineyards, quiet narrow lanes and the odd chateau or charming *chambre*

d'hôte (private bed & breakfast). On its southern side spills the golden sand of France's most chic beach (p345): Pampelonne stretches for 9km from **Cap du Pinet** to **Cap Camarat**, a rocky cape dominated by France's second-tallest **lighthouse** (admission free; ☹ variable), operational since 1831, electrified in 1946 and automated from 1977. The hike up its 84 steps gives fabulous views of St-Tropez, this rich green peninsula and the Med. For fine dining, there's **La Plage des Jumeaux** (☎ 04 94 58 21 80; rte de l'Épi; ☹ lunch Thu-Mon, lunch & dinner Jul & Aug), on the beach.

Cap Lardier, the peninsula's southernmost cape, is protected by the Parc National de Port-Cros (see p366). **Cap Taillat**, 1km northeast, is similarly guarded by the Conservatoire du Littoral (which bought it from Club Med after it tried to turn the precious, nature-rich cape into the world's largest Club Med in the 1970s). The tiny spit of sandy land today supports a range of important habitats, from seashore to wooded cliffs, and hides some of France's rarest plant species as well as a population of Hermann tortoises (see the boxed text, p362). Both can be accessed from Gigaro.

Gassin & Ramatuelle

In medieval **Gassin** (population 2752, elevation 200m), 11km southwest of St-Tropez atop a rocky promontory, narrow streets wend up to the village church (1558). The village's most wowing feature is the 360-degree panoramic view of the peninsula, St-Tropez bay and the Maures forests – don't miss it!

From Gassin, rte des Moulins de Paillans snakes 3km southeast to **Ramatuelle** (population 2174, elevation 136m), an immeasurably picturesque labyrinthine walled village. Its unusual name is thought to come from 'Rahmatu'llah', meaning Divine Gift, a legacy of the 10th-century Saracen occupation. Jazz and theatre fill the tourist-packed streets dur-

POLO

Yes, wealthy old St-Tropez even has its very own polo club, the **Polo Club de St-Tropez** (☎ 04 94 55 22 12; www.polo-st-tropez.com; rte de Bourrian, Gassin) with a state-of-the-art club-house designed like a ship, a restaurant and several pro instructors who can help aspiring players saddle up and have a bash at the royal game. The polo season runs April to September.

ing August's back-to-back **Festival de Ramatuelle** (www.festivalderamatuelle.com) and **Jazz Festival** (www.jazzfestivalramatuelle.com), and a Provençal market sets central place du Village abuzz on Thursday and Sunday mornings.

The fruits of the peninsula's vineyards – Côtes de Provence wine – can be tested at various chateaux along the D61; **Ramatuelle tourist office** (☎ 04 98 12 64 00; www.ramatuelle-tourisme.com in French; place de l'Ormeau; ☹ 9am-1pm & 3-7.30pm Jul & Aug, 9am-1pm & 3-7pm Mon-Sat Apr, Jun & Sep, 9am-12.30pm & 2-6pm Mon-Fri Oct-Mar) has a list of estates where you can taste and buy, and organises lovely **guided nature walks** (two hours, adult/under 10 years €8/free) every Thursday through vineyards, along the coast and to the **Moulin de Paillans** (admission free; ☹ 10am-noon Tue Apr-Oct), a restored windmill above the village on the D89.

SLEEPING & EATING

Ferme Ladouceur (☎ 04 94 79 24 95; www.fermeladouceur.com; quartier Les Roullière, Ramatuelle; d €89-96; menu incl wine €38; ☹ dinner) Breakfast in summer beneath a fig tree at this lovely *chambre d'hôte* in a 19th-century *bastide* (country manor) with a rustic restaurant open to anyone who fancies an evening taste of good old-fashioned farm cuisine. Find it north of Ramatuelle, signposted right off the northbound D61 to St-Tropez.

La Vigne de Ramatuelle (☎ 04 94 79 12 50; www.hotel-vignederamatuelle.com; rte des Plages; d low/mid/high season from €95/150/230; ☹ Easter-Oct; ☹ ☹ ☹ ☹) The 14 rooms inside this attractive ginger house with olive-green paintwork and a sea of vines outside are booked out months ahead of time. Perhaps the incredible silence that hits you in its manicured gardens or sparkling pool is the reason why. Find it 2km east of the Col de Collebas on the D93. Parking is €9.90.

Les Moulins de Ramatuelle (☎ 04 94 97 17 22; www.christophe-leroy.com; rte des Plages; d low/mid/high season from €120/195/222; mains/plat du jour €25/15, menu €70; ☹ May-Oct; ☹ ☹) Five elegant rooms slumber above one of the peninsula's tastiest country-dining restaurants at this old, foliage-covered stone house with perfectly manicured garden and vegetable patch. Christophe Leroy is the culinary hot shot behind it; he runs cooking courses (see the boxed text, p52).

Villa Marie (☎ 04 94 97 40 22; www.villamarie.fr; chemin Val de Rian, rte des Plages; d low/high season from €196/407; ☹ May-mid-Oct; ☹ ☹) The height of luxury, decadence and sheer romance, this exquisite abode easily makes it to the top of the 'perfect marriage-proposal material' list.

Stylish is an understatement; style is rustic country and the spa is heaven on earth.

Snoozing/lunch recommendations in Ramatuelle village:

L'Écurie du Castellás (☎ 04 94 79 20 67; www.l'ecuriecastellas.com; rte des Moulin de Paillans; d low/high season from €76/91, menus €33 & €46) Dining on a flowery terrace with eagle's-eye rooftop view.

Café de l'Ormeau (place du Village) Quintessential village café and bar with vine-covered tables overlooking the village square.

Le Vesuvio (☎ 04 94 79 21 60; 19 av Georges Clemenceau; pizza €8.50-13, pasta €10; ☹ lunch & dinner) Italianate pizza, pasta and seafood kebabs at this 25-year-old firm favourite.

La Croix Valmer & Gigaro

A short distance from the shore, at the southwestern tip of the Presqu'île de St-Tropez, **La Croix Valmer** (population 2846) itself is hardly inspiring but the sleeping and dining options around the small town are gems. Its **tourist office** (☎ 04 94 55 12 12; www.lacroixvalmer.fr; Esplanade de la Gare) has complete lists.

From the roundabout at the southern end of town, the last exit strikes east to **Gigaro**, a pinprick seaside hamlet with a fine sandy beach and a small water-sports school. From the far end of the beach, a board maps out the **sentier littoral** (coastal path) that wends its way dramatically around the coast to beautiful Plage des Brouis (1.5km, 40 minutes), Cap Lardier (3.7km, 1½ hours), Plage de Briande (6km, 2¼ hours) and beyond past Cap Taillat to L'Escalet (7.9km, 2¾ hours). Bikes are not allowed along the well-signposted trail.

From Gigaro, the narrow but drop-dead gorgeous D93 winds inland over the Col de Collebas (129m) to Ramatuelle – a good ride for mountain bikers. **L'Escalet**, accessible by a 2.5km road signposted off the D93, is a pretty little rocky cove with plenty of chanting cicadas and dried seaweed along the shoreline.

SLEEPING & EATING

Options for seaside souls are quite divine in this lesser-known corner of paradise, with something outstanding to suit every budget.

Le Refuge (☎ 04 94 79 67 38; d/tr/studio from €53/69/80; ☹ Apr-Sep; ☹ ☹) Around for 25 years already, this fabulous seaside house with wooden shutters is set back off the sand at the end of a dead-end lane between trees. Inside, 11 humble rooms and four studios with kitchenette provide simple sleeping, opening onto private little tabled

terraces. The same people cook up tasty grills at Le Refuge (menus €22 and €28), its restaurant at the start of the coastal path.

La Pinède Plage (☎ 04 94 79 67 38; www.pinedeplage.com; d low/high season from €162/231, menu €50; ☹ Apr-Sep; P ☹ ☹) The orientation of this hotel (plump in a sea of vineyards with its front side facing the water) is towards the Med. Dine on a stylish wooden decking terrace looking out to sea, by the pool or on mellow wicker chairs in a nautical-themed interior. Luxury apartments for four with sea view and terrace start at €469.

Château de Valmer (☎ 04 94 55 15 15; www.chateauvalmer.com; d low/high season from €201/288, treehouse €320/400, menu €58; P ☹ ☹) If Pinède Plage is for water nymphs, its big sister down the road – a 19th-century wine-producer's mansion – is for nature bods. Sleep above vines in a luxurious *cabane perchée* (treehouse), stroll its heavily scented vegetable and herb gardens, and play hide-and-seek around century-old palm and olive trees.

Couleurs du Jardin (☎ 04 94 79 59 12; starters €12-15, mains €25; ☹ lunch & dinner Apr-Sep) Eclectic and hip, this imaginative beachside space is *the* place to dine and/or drink. Loll on cushioned seating beneath the trees or pick a table on the terrace with nothing between you and the deep blue sea (bar sand). Cuisine is fish- and market-fuelled – grilled sardines or the catch of the

day, followed by strawberry and pineapple soup spiced with a dash of local wine, make a handsome lunch. Reservations are crucial.

Recommended *chambre d'hôte*:

Ferme de l'Audrac (☎ 04 98 12 91 00; s/d incl breakfast €40/77; ☹ Apr-Oct) Four rooms on a vine-covered farm in the middle of nowhere, hugged by vineyards and forest, signposted 1.6km east of the Col de Collebassee.

GOLFE DE ST-TROPEZ

Brash, flash Ste-Maxime dominates the northern end of the bay, while smart aloof Port Grimaud – the 'Venice of Provence' – draws crowds – the southwest with its rainbow of houses straddling manmade waterways. Inland, medieval Grimaud makes a charming if busy retreat from the beaches.

Book accommodation through the **Maison du Tourisme** (☎ 04 94 55 22 00; www.golfe-infos.com; ☹ 9am-7pm Mon-Fri, 9am-6pm Sat, 9am-5.30pm Sun mid-Jun–mid-Sep, earlier closing & closed Sun mid-Sep–mid-Jun), overlooking the busy giant roundabout 2km south of Port Grimaud on the N98 in Carrefour de la Foux.

Ste-Maxime pop 11,978

Sandy Ste-Maxime, 14km northwest of St-Tropez, screams BEACH RESORT in ever so loud, capital letters. The place is modern,

concrete and crawls with sun-catchers: you'd never guess it was founded by monks in AD 1000. Countless water-sports clubs line the beachfront and there are water slides galore at kid-busy **Aqualand** (☎ 08 92 68 66 13; www.aqualand.fr; adult/child €23/16.50; ☹ 10am-7pm Jul & Aug, to 6pm Jun & Sep) on the edge of town.

Touristy cafés, craft stalls and souvenir shops cram its pedestrian old town, centred around rue Gambetta. Giant pans of paella, fruit stalls and pastry shops line rue Courbet, a cobbled street leading to the town's main market square, place du Marché. Flowers, fish, olives, oil, wine and *tartes Tropéziennes* are sold in the **covered market** (4 rue Fernand Bessy).

The **tourist office** (☎ 04 94 55 75 55; www.sainte-maxime.com; 1 promenade Simon Lorient; ☹ 9am-8pm Mon-Sat, 10am-noon & 4-7pm Sun Jul & Aug, shorter hr & closed Sun Sep-Jun) has information on everything.

BOAT EXCURSIONS

April to September, **Les Bateaux Verts** (☎ 04 94 49 29 39; www.bateauxverts.com; 14 quai Léon Condroyer) runs regular boat excursions from its portside base to Baie des Cannebières (adult/four to 12 years €12.50/6.50); Gulf of St-Tropez, stopping either in St-Tropez (€14.40/8.20) and/or Port-Grimaud (€20.40/12.50); Calanques de l'Estérel (€16.90/10.20); Caps Camarat, Taillat and Lardier (€16.90/10.20); Cannes (€29/18.50); Îles de Lérins (€29/18.50); Port-Cros (€29/18.50) and Porquerolles (€33/21).

GETTING THERE & AWAY

There are regular buses and shuttleboats between St-Tropez and Ste-Maxime (p351). In Ste-Maxime boats depart from 14 quai Léon Condroyer at the port.

Port Grimaud

Hard to believe pretty little Port Grimaud stands on top of what, in the 1960s, was a 1-sq-km mosquito-filled swamp. Within the high wall that barricades the town from the busy N98, colourful cottages stand gracefully alongside yacht-laden waterways. On Thursday and Sunday mornings a **market** fills place du Marché, from where a bridge leads to Port Grimaud's modernist **church**. Inside, sunbeams shine through a stained-glass window designed by Vasarely, which tends to polarise viewers into lovers and haters. A panorama of red rooftops fans out from the **bell tower** (admission €1).

François Spoerry (1912–99), the Alsatian architect who dreamt up this massive water world,

fought from 1962 to 1966 to get the authorities to agree to his proposal inspired by pictures of prehistoric lagoon towns. Now 400,000 visitors a year come to gape at his work, with its mighty 12km of quays, 7km of canals and mooring space for 3000 luxury yachts. Spoerry, who went on to design Port Liberty in New York, is buried in Port Grimaud's church.

Cars are forbidden (the car park outside charges €2.20 per hour); bronzed residents cruise around in speedboats; and *tenue correcte* (correct dress) is insisted upon, except on the wide sandy beach that can be accessed on foot from Grand Rue.

The **tourist office** (☎ 04 94 56 02 01; quai des Fossés; ☹ 9am-12.30pm & 2.30-6.15pm Mon-Sat Jun–mid-Sep), outside the village on the N98, is next to Porche Ponant, a two-second walk from Porte de Poterne, the main pedestrian entrance into Port Grimaud.

SLEEPING

Chambres d'hôtes just don't exist in exclusive Port Grimaud.

Camping des Mûres (☎ 04 94 56 16 17; www.camping-des-mures.com; 2 people, tent & car low/high season €20/30; ☹ Apr-Sep) Just outside Port Grimaud, this three-star site has plenty of facilities and safe underground access to the beach. Campers can pay a €4/10 supplement in low/high season to pitch up on the front row – on the beach with no-one between you and the sea. Mobile homes, too.

Le Suffren (☎ 04 94 55 15 05; www.hotelleriedu-soleil.com; 16 place du Marché; d low/mid/high/very high season from €90/120/140/155; ☹ Apr–mid-Sep; P ☹ ☹) A smart mix of Art Deco and modern reds and whites bedecks Port Grimaud's most affordable option. Each of its 19 rooms has a delightful little balcony, overlooking either the market square or the port.

Hôtel Giraglia (☎ 04 94 56 31 33; www.hotelgiraglia.com; place du 14 Juin; d low/high season from €255/285; ☹ May-Oct; P ☹ ☹) Upping the ante is this four-star oasis of luxury and romance – definite drop-down-on-your-knee material. Delicious culinary creations are served with a flourish by waiters in dinner jackets at its poolside restaurant. Garage parking is €12.

EATING

Port Grimaud is jam-packed with restaurants, although many leave diners feeling they've paid over the odds for less-than-startling tourist fare.

HAPPY CAMPER

Camping on the beach is illegal but 15-odd camp sites (minimum seven-night stays in the high season) on the peninsula compensate, including exceptionally placed:

- **Kon Tiki** (☎ 04 94 55 96 96; www.riviera-villages.com; rte des Plages; 2 adults, tent & car low/mid/high season €15/35/40, front-row 4-person Tiki Hutte low/mid/high season €65/105/205; ☹ reception 8am-8pm Apr-Oct; P ☹ ☹) Primely placed on the beach next to a diving school at the northern end of Plage de Pampelonne, this site is large and, depending on the spot you plump for, can feel crowded. A front-row beachside 'Tiki Hutte' – a luxurious, ethnic-styled wooden chalet on the sand (marketed as 'the unique experience') – is prime real estate.
- **Les Tournels** (☎ 04 94 55 90 90; www.tournels.com; rte de Camarat, Ramatuelle; 2 adults, tent & car low/high season €22/38, 4-person wooden chalet €48/112; ☹ reception 9am-noon & 2-6pm Mar, Nov & Dec, 9am-8pm Apr-Jun, Sep & Oct, 8am-9pm Jul & Aug; P ☹ ☹) Green peninsula and blue sea views from this large, happy camper site on a hill between pine trees are unbeatable – a front-row bathroom-clad wooden chalet with terrace is nothing short of idyllic. Facilities cover everything, meaning no cooking (half-board is available should that be your cup of tea) and there's bags to do (tennis, sauna, gym, heated pool – no boxers) from sunrise to sunset.
- **Les Eucalyptus** (☎ 04 94 97 16 74; chemin des Moulins, Ramatuelle; 2 adults, tent & car low/high season €16.60/19.90; ☹ late May–mid-Sep) *Camping à la ferme* on this 10-hectare, family-run wine-producing estate is an intimate proposition. Pitch up between olive trees and Plage de Pampelonne is a 450m stroll away through vines. Philippe and Florence also have a handful of rooms in the main house, should bad weather drive you inside.

La Table du Mareyeur (☎ 04 94 56 06 77; www.mareyeur.com; 10 & 11 place Artisans; seafood platters €46-60, lunch menu €25; ☺ lunch & dinner Mar-Nov) An exception to the many tourist traps, those with a soft spot for all things fishy will adore this highly regarded seafood restaurant on the edge of a canal on the road to the beach, near Porte de Poterne. Oysters, whole red lobsters (from Brittany or Canada), monkfish with morel mushrooms – the choice is mouthwatering.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

There are buses between Port Grimaud and Grimaud (€1.30, 10 minutes, five daily summer) and St-Tropez (€3.20, 15 minutes, six to eight daily summer).

April to mid-October, an **electric tourist train** (☎ 04 94 54 09 09; www.nova.fr/petit-train-grimaud) shunts visitors between Port Grimaud and Grimaud (single/return €3/5.70, 50 minutes including tour of Grimaud, five daily). In Port Grimaud the stop is opposite Porte de Poterne, the pedestrian entrance to the marine village; in Grimaud it's on central place Neuve.

March to October, shuttleboats sail to/from St-Tropez (p351).

GETTING AROUND

Bicycle

L'Amiral (☎ 04 94 43 47 32; www.amiral-immobilier.com; 51 Grand Rue) hires bikes for €5/15 per hour/day.

Boat

Mid-June to mid-September, **Coches d'Eau** (☎ 04 94 56 21 13; 12 place du Marché) runs 20-minute boat tours of Port Grimaud (adult/three to 12 years €4/2), departing from place du Marché every 10 minutes between 9am and 10pm daily (shorter hours outside July and August).

Across the bridge on place de l'Église, hire a *barque électrique* (electric boat) for €20 per 30 minutes for up to four people, Easter to mid-November.

Inside Porte de Poterne, **Nautic Location** (☎ 04 94 56 00 13; www.nautic-location.com; 1 place des Artisans) hires out speedboats (for licence-holders; deposit required) and less powerful five-person cabin boats (for nonlicence-holders) costing €40/100/120 per hour/half-day/day.

Grimaud

pop 3850 / elev 105m

Port Grimaud's tourist-busy medieval sibling is an all too picture postcard-perfect, Provençal hilltop village 3km inland. Crowned

with the dramatic shell of **Château du Grimaud**, its past is bloody – the castle was built in the 11th century, fortified in the 15th century, destroyed during the Wars of Religion (1562–98), rebuilt in the 17th century, and wrecked again during the French Revolution. Evening concerts held on the stage in the ruins here during the music festival, **Les Grimaldines**, in July and August are magical.

In the heart of the village, local lore comes to life in the small **Musée des Arts et Traditions Populaires** (☎ 04 94 43 39 29; rte Nationale; admission free; ☺ 2.30-6pm Mon-Sat May-Sep, 2-5.30pm Mon-Sat Oct-Apr), in an old oil mill. Market day (place Vieille) is Thursday morning.

Grimaud **tourist office** (☎ 04 94 55 43 83; www.grimaud-provence.com; 1 blvd des Aliziers; ☺ 9am-12.30pm & 2.30-6.15pm Mon-Sat), on the D558 at the foot of the village (a lift connects the two), has information on village walks with or without a guide: the **sentier découverte du Vallon du Pont des Fées** trail takes you past the restored **Moulin St-Roch** (medieval windmill; admission free; ☺ 9am-1pm & 2.30-7.15pm Mon & Wed-Fri) to the **Pont des Fées** (Fairy Bridge), a 15th-century aqueduct.

South of the village, along the D61 towards St-Tropez, enjoy the fruity aroma of local wine at **Caves des Vignerons de Grimaud** (☎ 04 94 43 20 14; 36 av des Oliviers; ☺ 8.30am-12.30pm & 2-6.15pm Mon-Sat Mar-Jul), a cooperative where you can stock up on Vin de Pays du Var or a Les Grimaldines rosé for €2 a litre.

In summer buses run between St-Tropez and St-Raphaël (€9.50, 1¼ hours, six to eight daily) via Grimaud or Port Grimaud (€3.20, 20 minutes).

NORTHERN VAR

What a difference a few miles can make! The northern half of the Var *département* (generally agreed to be everything north of the noisy A8 *autoroute*) is vastly different from its coastal counterpart: in this rural hinterland there's not a grain of sand or oiled body to be seen. Instead, peaceful hilltop villages drowse beneath the midday sun, creating a glorious vision of unspoiled Provence.

Draguignan is the sore thumb in this romantic area, a gritty, hard-nosed town, where the French army maintains its largest military base. From here, the vast Plateau de Canjers sprawls for 30km north to the foot of the Gorges du Verdon (p234).

East of Draguignan, the green Pays Dracénois is pierced by the perched villages of Fayence and Bargemon. West of Draguignan, numerous little places deal in black truffles and terracotta tiles. Regional wines can be tried and tasted in and around medieval Les Arcs-sur-Argens, to the south.

DRAGUIGNAN

pop 34,814 / elev 187m

France's 'Capital d'Artillerie' is the hard nut at the centre of chocolate-box Provence, and not to everyone's taste. However, you'll almost certainly pass through it when travelling round the Pays Dracénois – a welcome bite of reality for many.

Collect a free town map marked up with a historical walking itinerary from the **tourist office** (☎ 04 98 10 51 05; 2 av Lazare Carnot; ☺ 9.15am-12.15pm & 1.45-6pm Mon-Sat). The latter has a list of accommodation in town, but sleeping options around Draguignan (p358) are overwhelmingly more charming.

Sights

Old guns, cannons and munitions are among the exhibits in the **Musée de l'Artillerie** (Artillery Museum; ☎ 04 98 10 83 85; musee.artillerie@worldonline.fr; av de la Grande Armée; admission free; ☺ 9am-noon & 1.30-5.30pm Sun-Wed), inside the artillery school. In the **American cemetery**, a monument pays homage to the combat that occurred around Draguignan during WWII – 9000 American and British soldiers were parachuted in on 15 August 1944.

Traditional Provençal costumes, musical instruments and other ethnographic finds form the **Musée des Arts & Traditions Provençales** (Museum of Arts & Provençal Traditions; ☎ 04 94 47 05 72; 15 rue Roumanille; adult/child €3.50/1.50; ☺ 9am-noon & 2-6pm Tue-Sat, 2-6pm Sun).

In the last tiny patch of Draguignan's old town, the 18m-tall **tour d'horloge** (clock tower), with its ornate campanile, is worth a photo.

Getting There & Around

From the **bus station** (☎ 04 94 68 15 34; blvd des Martyrs de la Résistance), there are regular daily buses to/from St-Raphaël (€6, 1¼ hours) and Les Arcs-sur-Argens, home to the closest train station (p360). Services to/from Grasse, Marseille and Toulon are less frequent.

Pick up wheels from **Holiday Bikes** (☎ 04 98 10 63 08; draguignan@holiday-bikes.com; 834 rte de Draguignan). A mountain bike/50cc scooter/125cc motorbike costs around €15/40/60 per day.

A HOUSE IN PARADISE

Dreaming of a house in paradise? Visit **Maison d'Hôtes du Var** (www.mhprovence.com) to find a clutch of beautiful family homes, farms and castles throughout the Var region that open their doors to B&B (and often dinner) guests.

AROUND DRAGUIGNAN

Draguignan town might not turn you on but its surrounding countryside is among Provence's prettiest – and least populated.

Pays Dracénois

East of Draguignan (along the D562, then the D225 and D25 north) is dinky **Callas** (population 1388, elevation 398m), where the family of Nicole and Serge have cultivated olives to make oil at **Le Moulin de Callas** (☎ 04 94 39 03 20; www.moulindecallas.com; ☺ 10am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Sat) since 1928. The mill turns at the southern foot of the village, pressing the freshly harvested olives of 400-odd local olive farmers. Learn about olive oil and buy (€14 a litre) in the on-site shop; for a greater insight, see p50). Afterwards, make your way uphill past the **tourist office** (☎ 04 94 39 06 77; ot.callas@wanadoo.fr; place du 18 Juin 1940; ☺ 9.15am-12.15pm & 1.45-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-noon Sat) in the car park, to the central square for a stunning panorama of the red-rock Massif de l'Estérel.

Bargemon (population 1217, elevation 416m), 6km north, hit the headlines when the Beckhams bought a pad here in 2004. It has plenty of medieval streets and ramparts to stroll, and a Thursday **market**. Its **tourist office** (☎ 04 94 47 81 73; www.ot-bargemon.fr; av Pasteur; ☺ 10.15am-1pm & 3-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-noon Sat) has information on the entire area.

Seillans (population 2115, elevation 365m), a scenic 11km drive east, is an irresistibly pretty, typical Provençal village with cobbled lanes coiling to its crown and a couple of impossibly delicious sleeping and eating options.

Medieval **Fayence** (population 3502, elevation 350m), a scenic motor 5km east, is a picturesque village with an overdose of (English-speaking) estate agents and plenty of resident foreigners in its wealthy population. Climb uphill to its weathered **bell tower** for a fabulous panorama. There is a **tourist office** (☎ 04 94 76 20 08; ot.fayence@wanadoo.fr; place Léon Roux; ☺ 9am-12.30pm & 2.30-7pm Mon-Sat, 10am-noon Sun).

SLEEPING & EATING

La Sousto (☎ 04 94 76 02 16; hotel-sousto@wanadoo.fr; place du Paty, Fayence; d/tr €46/53) Something of a dying breed, this six-room hotel unchanged for 20 years or so fills three wonky floors of an old *maison de village* with fountain and pocket-sized public garden in front. For the ultimate in simple grandeur, snag room No 5 with rooftop terrace and fabulous view.

Le Coq qui Chante (☎ 04 94 76 63 40; dami.guiaud@wanadoo.fr; quartier Les Garduelles, Bargemon; d/tr/q incl breakfast €73.50/94.50/115.50, stays of plus 2 nights d/tr/q incl breakfast €49/63/77; 📍) Delve into life on an olive farm at the Cock who Sings, a 4000-sq-metre olive-producing estate, 2km from Bargemon village, with a cute little stone house – separate from the main house where olive farmers Daniele and Michele live – for B&B guests. Best suited for families, a double and single bed slumbers up top on a mezzanine and there's a sofa bed in the lounge, should you be four. Breakfast is brought to you, and the house has its own little terrace overlooking olive groves.

Hôtel des 2 Rocs (☎ 04 94 76 87 32; www.hoteldeuxrocs.com; 1 place Don't d'Amont, Seillans; small/medium/large d €63/95/125, menus €28 & €35; 🍷 restaurant lunch & dinner Tue-Sun) Scipion, knight of the Flotte d'Agout, lived here in the 17th century. Today, the soulful *bastide* is home to Julie and Nicolas Malzac who run this 14-room boutique hotel and restaurant with extraordinary panache (the couple have worked with Alain Ducasse and other big names in the past). Summer dining is alfresco around a fountain beneath trees.

Memorable dining options in Fayence:

La Farigoulette (☎ 04 94 84 10 49; place du Château; menu €34; 🍷 lunch & dinner Wed-Sun) Ravioli stuffed with foie gras, duck liver pan-fried with almonds and peaches and other delectable market-driven dishes near the belfry.

Le Temps des Cerises (☎ 04 94 76 01 19; place de la République; menu €37; 🍷 lunch & dinner Wed-Fri, Sun & Mon, dinner Sat) French and world cuisine by Dutch chef Louis Schröder beneath a leafy pagoda.

Le Castelleras (☎ 04 94 76 13 80; rte de Seillans; menus €43 & €58; 🍷 lunch & dinner Wed-Sun Apr-Feb) The ultimate gastronomic choice.

Haut-Var

West of Draguignan, the rich soil of the Haut-Var region hides earthy black truffles, snouted out November to March. Other gastronomic delights await travellers in a clutch of sleepy, beautifully unspoilt villages teetering on hill-

tops, although you'll need your own transport to reach them.

Châteaudouble (population 390), north of Draguignan and topped by a chateau no less, and **Tourtour** (population 470, elevation 470m) 16km west along the wiggly D51, are two typically 'eagle nest' villages perched up high. In Tourtour buy oil and, from around 15 December (after the harvest), watch olives being pressed at the village's restored 17th-century **moulin à huile** (oil mill; ☎ 04 94 70 54 74). The vaulted stone building hosts art exhibitions when it's not busy pressing olives. Guided tours of the mill and village are run by the **tourist office** (☎ 04 94 70 59 47; www.tourisme-tourtour.com; montée de St-Denis; 🍷 9am-noon & 2.30-6pm).

AUPS

pop 1900 / elev 505m

In the truffle season (November to March), those alien-looking nuggets of black fungus can be viewed at the Thursday morning **truffle market**, held on the central square. Truffle hunts and demonstrations of pig-snouting techniques lure a crowd on the fourth Sunday in January, when Aups throws its **Journée de la Truffe** (Day of the Truffle).

SALERNES & AROUND

Handmade terracotta tiles known as *terres cuites* (literally 'baked earth') have been manufactured since the 18th century in **Salernes** (population 3343, elevation 300m), 9km south of Aups along the wiggly D31. Salernes **tourist office** (☎ 04 94 70 69 02; www.ville-salernes.fr in French; place Gabriel Péri; 🍷 9.30am-12.30pm & 2.30-6.30pm Tue-Sat) has a list of local potters and tilemakers (online at www.salernes.com) who open their workshop doors to visitors and can update you on the future **Terra Rossa Maison de la Céramique de Salernes**. Sited in an old factory currently being transformed into a state-of-the-art industrial space, the ceramic museum is slated to open in early 2008.

Cotignac (population 2040, elevation 230m), 11km southwest of Salernes, with its lively morning market; hilltop **Entrecasteaux** (population 850, elevation 156m), a classified historical monument with a 17th-century chateau; and pint-sized **Fox-Amphoux** (population 380, elevation 540m), with an idyllic village inn oozing history in the shape of **Auberge du Vieux Fox** (☎ 04 94 80 71 69; place de l'Église; d €65-100, menu €18; 🍷 mid-Jan-mid-Nov, restaurant closed Thu) are other pretty Varois villages well worth the wiggly drive.

Le Thoronet & La Celle

The third in a trio of great Cistercian abbeys (the other two are Silvacane and Notre-Dame de Sénanque), **Abbaye de Thoronet** (☎ 04 94 60 43 90; adult/under 18yr €6.50/free; 🍷 10am-6.30pm Mon-Sat, 10am-noon & 2-6.50pm Sun Apr-Sep, 10am-1pm & 2-5pm Mon-Sat, 10am-noon & 2-5pm Sun Oct-Mar), 12km southwest of Lorgues, is remarkable for its ultra-austere architecture: pure proportions, perfectly dressed stone and the subtle fall of light and shadow are where its beauty lies. The chapterhouse, where the monks met to discuss community problems, is more ornate as the only secular room in the complex. Built between 1160 and 1190, early Gothic influences are visible in the pointed arches. Sunday mass is celebrated at noon and concerts are held in summer.

The tiny village of La Celle, some 15km southwest of Thoronet and 2km south of Brignoles, is dominated by **Abbaye de la Celle** (place des Ormeaux), a 12th-century Benedictine abbey that served as a convent from 1225 until its eventual closure in 1657. The church serves the village community today, and hauntingly beautiful **classical concerts** (☎ 04 94 69 10 86; www.soireesmusicales-lacelle.com; tickets €23) fill its cloister in July and August. In the adjoining convent you can taste and buy Coteaux Varois AOC wines at the **Maison des Vins Coteaux Varois** (☎ 04 94 69 33 18; place des Ormeaux; 🍷 10am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Sat).

SLEEPING & EATING

Hostellerie de l'Abbaye de la Celle (☎ 04 98 05 14 14; www.abbaye-celle.com; place du Général de Gaulle, La Celle; d from €205, lunch menus €42, dinner menus €57 & €76; 📍 🍷 🍷) Top chefs Bruno Clément and Alain Ducasse are the creative energies behind this fabulous four-star hotel and restaurant in La Celle with 11 country-style rooms and alfresco dining to drool over. If you've got a penchant for bathtubs with legs, pick the Cedar Tree.

Château de Bernes (☎ 04 94 60 43 53; www.chateaubernes.com; chemin de Berne, Lorgues; d low/mid/high season from €280/360/410; 🍷 Mar-Oct; 📍 🍷 🍷) Far from intimate, this dynamic wine-growing estate 2km north of Lorgues village offers all kinds of entertainment, including wine tasting, mushroom days, truffle-hunting demos, cooking courses and wonderful jazz picnics. Oh, and it has 16 top-end hotel rooms.

Les Arcs-sur-Argens

pop 6300 / elev 65m

Les Arcs, 11km south of Draguignan, is a perfectly restored old town perched on a hillock,

with a bacchanalian House of Wines where you can taste, learn about and buy Côtes de Provence wines.

The **tourist office** (☎ 04 94 73 37 30; www.ville-les-arcs.com; place du Général de Gaulle; 🍷 9am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Fri) is at the foot of the medieval village. Lordly lodgings can be found in the 11th-century castle crowning the village, which shelters the luxurious **Logis du Guetteur** (☎ 04 94 99 51 10; www.logisduguetteur.com; place du Château; d low/high season from €108/130; 🍷 Mar-Jan; 📍 🍷 🍷).

WINE TASTING

The **Maison des Vins Côtes de Provence** (☎ 04 94 99 50 20; www.cotes-de-provence.fr in French; 🍷 10am-7pm Mon-Sat, 10am-6pm Sun Apr-Sep, to 6pm Mon-Sat Oct-Mar), 2.5km south of the village on the westbound N7, is the obvious place to start. Sixteen different Côtes de Provence wines are selected for tasting each week (look for the list that tells you the ideal dish to eat with each wine) and over 800 different wines from 230 different wine estates are for sale at producers' prices (starting at €2.85 for a bottle of simple rosé by village cooperative Les Vignerons des Cotignac and peaking at €29 for a bottle of AOC Côtes de Provence Cuvée Guy Da Nine Rosé produced by Château de la Mascaronne in Le Luc). To experience the pleasure of wining *and* dining, lunch at on-site **La Vigne à Table** (☎ 04 94 47 48 47; starters €15, mains €20-30, menu €34).

A prestigious *cru classé* wine, produced since the 14th century, can be tasted and bought at **Château Ste-Roseline** (☎ 04 94 99 50 30; www.sainte-roseline.com; 🍷 9am-6pm), nestled among vineyards 4.5km east of Les Arcs-sur-Argens (on the D91 towards La Motte). A lovely 1975 mosaic by Marc Chagall illuminates the estate's 13th-century Romanesque **Chapelle de Ste-Roseline** (🍷 2.30-6pm Tue-Sun), which contains the corpse of St Roseline. Roseline was born at the chateau in Les Arcs in 1263 and became a Carthusian nun. She experienced numerous visions during her lifetime and was said to be able to curtail demons. Upon her death in 1329, her eyes were taken out and separately preserved. Piano recitals and musical concerts are held in the chapel in July and August.

La Motte, the first village in Provence to be liberated after the August 1944 Allied landings, is 3km further east along the D91. For the ultimate Provençal feast, head east out of La Motte along the D47 to **Domaine de la Maurette** (☎ 04 94 45 92 82; rte de Callas; menu incl apéritif

A PERFECT DAY

Create your own perfect day: spend it motoring around the villages of Haut-Var, winding up at these exquisite dinner and overnight author's choices:

- Chez Bruno** (☎ 04 94 85 93 93; www.restaurantbruno.com; rte de Vidauban; d/ste from €110/306, menus €59, €80, €100 & €120; 🚗 lunch & dinner Jun–mid-Sep, lunch & dinner Tue–Sat, lunch Sun mid-Sep–Apr) France's most famous truffle restaurant can be found in a country house 2km east of the tiny backwater of Lorgues, on the D562 towards Les Arcs. In his Michelin-starred restaurant, chef Bruno Clément cooks almost exclusively with those knobably, pungent delicacies: he gets through an incredible 1000kg of the world's most expensive foodstuff every year. Should you not be able to move after your black diamond feast, Bruno has six lovely rooms up top. Breakfast is continental (€15) or built around truffles (€30).
- La Sarrazine** (☎ 04 94 73 20 27; www.lasarrazine.com; 375 chemin du Pendedi; d low/mid/high season from €75/88/99; 📍) Raved about in the *Sunday Times*, this British-run *chambre d'hôte* languishing in extensive grounds is undeniably lovely. It has tennis courts, flower-bedecked pool and, to preserve the peace of the stately house, no guests under 12 years.

€28.50; 🚗 cave 10am–6pm Mon–Sat, restaurant lunch), on the intersection of the D47 and the D25. On this wine estate you can taste and buy wine, and dine on a vine-covered terrace in its *ferme auberge*, a roadside inn where the atmosphere of chattering people dining on wholesome, homemade food is nothing short of electric. Truffle-stuffed ravioli, veal kidneys in red wine and *tournedos façon Rossini* (pan-fried beef tenderloin medallions topped with a slice of foie gras) are tasty highlights.

GETTING THERE & AROUND

Exit Les Arcs-Draguignan train station, turn left, then right at the end of the street. It's a 2km walk straight up this road (av Jean Jaurès) to the town centre.

Les Arcs, on the rail line between St-Raphaël and Toulon, is well served by coastal trains to Nice (€12.90, 1½ hours), Marseille (€18.40, 1¾ hours) and all the stops in between. Les Arcs also serves as the train station for Draguignan.

Les Rapides Varois (☎ 04 94 47 05 05) runs buses every 30 minutes between Les Arcs train station and Draguignan (€3.20, 20 minutes).

MASSIF DES MAURES

Wild boar roam the forests of the Massif des Maures (from the Provençal word *maouro*, meaning dark pine wood), whose hidden towns and villages are little oases of peace. Traditional industries – chestnut harvests, cork production, pipe-making – are their

lifeblood, a pleasant surprise in the tourist-economised south of France.

There are superb walking and cycling opportunities, particularly as much of the area is inaccessible by car. The GR91 long-distance trail penetrates the massif at its northern edge, near **Carnoules** (population 2622), wending its way past **Notre Dame des Anges** (780m) and La Sauvette to medieval La Garde Freinet.

The D14 runs through Collobrières, the largest town in the massif and chestnut capital of the universe. This road is particularly popular with cyclists and is graced with fine panoramas. Similarly dramatic is the D39 from Collobrières, which winds and soars up to Notre Dame des Anges before plunging down to Gonfaron. The parallel N98, which skims through vineyards and cork-oak-tree plantations, runs from St-Tropez to Bormes-les-Mimosas and on to Hyères.

The Corniche des Maures is the southernmost extent of the area, where pine trees give way to buckets and spades at Le Lavandou and smaller beach resorts to the east.

COLLOBRIÈRES

pop 1600 / elev 150m

Hidden in the forest 24km west of Grimaud, this leafy village is the self-proclaimed 'capital' of the Maures. Nut lovers will be in seventh heaven: the town is famous for its chestnut produce. Food and drink made from the nuts is sold in summer in front of the tourist office, along with souvenirs made from cork-oak, another local industry. Market day is Thursday (July and August) and Sunday (year-round).

Information

The **tourist office** (☎ 04 94 48 08 00; www.collobrieres.fr in French; blvd Charles Caminat; 🕒 10am–12.30pm & 2–6.30pm Mon–Sat Jul & Aug, 10am–noon & 2–6pm Tue–Sat Sep–Jun) takes accommodation bookings and has details on joining in the October chestnut harvest and participating in guided forest walks (€7). Three short walking trails – including a 200m trail to a *châtaigneraie* (chestnut grove) – are mapped out on the notice board outside.

Sights

Over the 11th-century bridge, **Confiserie Azuréenne** (☎ 04 94 48 07 20) sells a nutty array of products. Sample *glaces aux marrons glacés* (chestnut ice creams), *crème de marrons* (chestnut cream), *marrons au sirop* (chestnuts in syrup), or a shot of *liqueur de châtaignes* (chestnut liqueur). Its small **Musée de la Fabrique** (admission free; 🕒 9.30am–1pm & 2–7pm or 8pm) opposite explains the art of making *marrons glacés* (candied chestnuts).

Festivals & Events

Collobrières cooks up a monstrous-sized *aioli Provençal complet* (a feast of various vegetables, potatoes, a boiled egg and small shellfish dunked in a pot of garlicky mayonnaise), and makes the place de la Libération fountain spout rosé wine during its annual **Grande Fête des Fontaines** in August. It celebrates a **Fête de la Châtaigne** (Chestnut Festival) on the last three Sundays in October, with craft and home-produce markets, street entertainment and the warming smell of roasted chestnuts drifting over the proceedings. In April the **Fête de la Transhumance** celebrates the seasonal moving of shepherds' flocks.

A MENHIR DETOUR

With your walking boots firmly laced, set off from the old bridge in Collobrières, walking uphill into town along rue Camille Desmoulins, rue Blanqui and rue Galilée. Follow the signs for the camp site and ruined 15th-century Église St Pons, which will lead you onto the GR90.

It's a steep climb out of town and into the woods, composed of oak trees (including cork-oak), pine, heathers and ferns, then the path ascends more gradually to about 450m above sea level, before levelling off as it reaches Plateau Lambert.

The trail comes out onto a forest road; follow it leftwards for 150m and it will lead you to the *garde forestière* (forest ranger) Ferme Lambert. Ask permission from the forest ranger before crossing the field to see the two biggest **menhirs** in the Var region, now heritage-listed monuments. Each one is over 3m high, and they were raised sometime between 3000 and 2000 BC. Another super sight is the **Châtaignier de Madame**, the biggest chestnut tree in Provence, with a mighty 10.4m circumference.

The walking detour should take you around four hours there and back again.

Sleeping & Eating

Hôtel-Restaurant des Maures (☎ 04 94 48 07 10; 19 blvd Lazare Carnot; d €22) Grab a room at the back of this central hotel overlooking the river and *pétanque* pitch. Its family-friendly, waterside restaurant is good for cheap, filling *menus*, and the downstairs bar sells chestnut ice cream for €3 a bowl.

La Bastide de la Cabrière (☎ 04 94 48 04 31; www.provencweb.fr/83/cabriere; rte de Gonfaron; d €75–125; 📍) This welcoming five-room *chambre d'hôte*, 6km north of town along the relentlessly winding D39, prepares delicious, seasonal home-grown meals (€35). You can also buy goats' cheese, fruit wine and jams to take away.

Ferme de Peïgros (☎ 04 94 48 03 83; fermepeïgros@wanadoo.fr; Col de Babaou; menu €22; 🕒 lunch daily) Goats and chestnuts are the mainstay of this farm restaurant, 1.8km along a gravel track signposted from the top of the Babaou mountain pass (8km from Collobrières). At different times of year, its menu includes farm-killed goat or poultry, boar, cepes and sometimes farm-made chestnut ice cream. No credit cards.

Getting Around

Cycling is a great way to get around: rent wheels from **Garage BM Varoise** (☎ 04 94 48 01 13; rte de Pierrefeu) at the entrance to the village. A half-/full day's rental costs €6.50/12.

CHARTREUSE DE LA VERNE

Majestic, 12th- to 13th-century **Monastère de la Verne** (☎ 04 94 43 45 51; adult/8–14yr €5/3; 🕒 11am–5pm or 6pm Wed–Mon Feb–Dec) is in a dramatic forest setting 12km southeast of Collobrières. The Carthusian monastery was founded in 1170, possibly on the site of a temple to the goddess

Laverna, protector of the bandits who hung out in the Maures. The Huguenots destroyed most of the original charterhouse in 1577. Since 1982 the solitary complex has been home to 15 nuns, of the Sisters of Bethlehem.

One of the old monks' cells has been fully restored, complete with a small formal garden, workshop and covered corridor, where the monk would pray as he paced. Other interesting features include the use of serpentine (a stripy green stone) as decoration; it's particularly noticeable in the door arches and vaulted ceiling of the 17th-century church. Various walking trails lead from the monastery into its forested surroundings.

Smoking and revealing clothes are forbidden in the monastery; nor can you steal the nuns' chestnuts from the trees outside. From Collobrières, follow rte de Grimaud (D14) east for 6km, then turn right (south) onto the narrow D214. Follow this road for a further 6km to the monastery; the final section of the single-track road is unpared.

LA GARDE FREINET

pop 1656 / elev 365m

A stark, rocky spur props up the 13th-century ruins of **Fort Freinet** (450m), from where there is a fantastic panorama of the small medieval town's red rooftops.

Its **tourist office** (☎ 04 94 43 67 41; www.lagarde-freinet-tourisme.com; Chapelle St-Jean, place de la Mairie;

☎ 9.30am-12.30pm & 3.30-6.30pm Mon-Sat year-round, plus 9.30am-12.30pm Sun Easter-Oct) has details on walking, wine tasting and *chambres d'hôtes* in the massif. Village traditions and customs unfold in the adjoining **Conservatoire du Patrimoine et du Traditions du Freinet** (☎ 04 94 43 08 57; www.conservatoiredufreinet.org; Chapelle St-Jean, place de la Mairie; adult/under 12yr €1.50/free; ☎ 10am-12.30pm & 3-6pm Tue-Sat). The latter also organises fascinating half-day nature walks, including a two-hour trip (€7) into the forest with a guide to learn how cork is harvested (see the boxed text, p78).

Festivals & Events

Below the ruined fort is a large stone cross where pilgrims pay their respects on 1 May each year during the town's *bravades*. The relics of St Clément, the village's patron saint, are paraded there, accompanied by the blasting of blunderbusses. The cross is a 20-minute uphill walk from the village centre, signposted from place Neuve.

La Garde Freinet celebrates its traditional **Fête de la Transhumance**, which marks the seasonal moving of the flocks, in mid-June, and hosts a **Fête de la Châtaigne** (Chestnut Fair) in mid-October.

Sleeping & Eating

Hôtel La Claire Fontaine (☎ 04 94 43 63 76; 4 place Vieille; d from €45) Out of a trio of midrange places to stay, this is the best value. Half the rooms

overlook a buzzing pedestrianised street, filled with bars and restaurants that can be noisy on summer weekends: ask for a back room if you want to sleep. Cheaper rooms share a toilet on the corridor.

COGOLIN

pop 9181

Industrious Cogolin, 15km south of La Garde Freinet, has a worldwide reputation for clarinet and saxophone reeds. It's also a centre for wooden pipes, cork products and *tapis de Cogolin* (carpets), woven here since the 1920s when Armenian refugees settled here. Its sandy beach and pleasure port is 5km northeast.

Several pipemakers on av Georges Clemenceau welcome visitors; the **tourist office** (☎ 04 94 55 01 50; www.cogolin-provence.com; place de la République; ☎ 9am-12.30pm & 2-6.30pm Mon-Fri, 9.30am-12.30pm Sat) has a complete list.

Provence's first screen hero, Raimu, is honoured at the **Musée Espace Raimu** (☎ 04 94 54 18 00; www.musee-raimu.com in French; 18 av Georges Clemenceau; adult/11-18yr €3.50/1.75; ☎ 10am-noon & 3-6pm low season, 10am-noon & 4-7pm high season, closed Sun morning), a museum established by the comic actor's granddaughter in the basement of the arts cinema.

Cycles Évasion (☎ 04 94 54 71 13; www.cycles-eva-sion.com; 61 av Georges Clemenceau) rents out bicycles for €15/70 per day/week.

Sleeping & Eating

Maison de la Monde (☎ 04 94 54 77 54; www.lamaison-dumonde.fr; 63 rue Carnot; small/medium/large low season €70/99/120, high season €95/135/156; ☎) This apricot boutique hotel with sage-green shutters is like home away from home. Tableau paintings fill the walls, fabrics are from around the world and a tiny path leads through the walled garden to the leafy pool.

Grain de Sel (☎ 04 94 54 46 86, 06 20 98 82 86; rue du 11 Novembre; menu €31; ☎ lunch & dinner Tue-Sat) This tiny bistro behind the town hall is quality stuff. Feast on age-old Provençal fodder like lamb *piéd et paquets* (sheep tripe and trotters) or a dish with a modern twist such as truffle risotto.

La Tarte Tropézienne (☎ 04 94 54 42 59; www.tarte-tropeziennne.com; 2 rue Beausoleil) It was here that the sugary *tarte Tropézienne* was created in 1955.

LA MÔLE & AROUND

Tiny La Môle (population 800), 9km southwest from Cogolin along the vineyard-laden

N98, is recognised for three things: Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, author of *Le Petit Prince*, who visited his grandparents here as a boy – their chateau features in the book; its **Boulangerie de la Môle** (☎ 7am-1pm & 4-7pm Tue-Sun) selling nut and olive breads, on the south side of the N98, towards Cogolin; and its manicured air strip (p351) where the truly wealthy land their private jets. Sample local wine at one of the many wine-producing chateaux on the westbound N98.

From La Môle, narrow route du Canadel (D27) dives dramatically to the coast. All is green serenity until you hit **Pachacaid** (☎ 04 94 55 70 80; www.pachacaid.com; rte du Canadel; 4-person mobile homes low/high season per week €300/750), a giant camp site full of holidaying families going wild in the neighbouring **Niagara Parc Nautique** (☎ 04 94 55 70 80; www.parcniagara.com; rte du Canadel; adult/5-13yr Jun €12/10, Jul & Aug €14/11.50; ☎ 10.30am-7pm Jun-early Sep), a water park with seven giant slides.

Sleeping & Eating

Domaine de Ventabren (☎ 04 94 49 51 21; www.le-domaine-de-ventabren.com; chemin des Guils, La Môle; d low/mid/high season incl breakfast from €81/91/101; ☎ Feb-Dec; ☎) Head out past the village church in La Môle and follow the signs for 3km to uncover this friendly five-room *chambre d'hôte*, a modern house surrounded by oak, cork and pine forest at the end of potholed gravel track. Cross the bridge over the ornamental pond and enter the pool-clad interior courtyard to find hosts Michèle and Emmanuel.

Auberge de La Môle (☎ 04 94 49 57 01; place de l'Église, La Môle; lunch/dinner menu €25/50) Tradition rules at this no-frills village inn, next to the church in La Môle. Once the village petrol station (the old pump outside is stuck on 333), the place fills up quick at lunchtime with hearty appetites eager to feast on its legendary terrines, pâtés and feisty jars of pickles. No credit cards.

FORÊT DU DOM & BORMES-LES-MIMOSAS

Vineyards melt into a rich patchwork of cork-oak, pine and chestnut trees as the N98 continues its path west into the Forêt du Dom, 12km west of La Môle.

From the top of the **Col de Gratteloup** (199m), the steep D41, a popular cycling route, climbs north over the **Col de Babau** (415m) towards Collobrières. Southbound, the D41 wiggles its way across the **Col de Caguo-Ven** (237m), from where there are good views of **Bormes-les-Mimosas**

VILLAGE DES TORTUES

About 20km north of Collobrières on the northern tip of the massif is a tortoise village, where one of France's rarest and most endangered species can be viewed at close quarters. The Hermann tortoise (*Testudo hermanni*), once common along the Mediterranean coastal strip, is today found only in the Massif des Maures and Corsica. Forest fires in 1990 destroyed 2500 sq km of forest in the massif, reducing the tortoise population further still.

The Station d'Observation et de Protection des Tortues des Maures (SOPTOM; Maures Tortoise Observation and Protection Station) was set up in 1985 by French film-maker Bernard Devaux and an English biologist to ensure the Hermann's survival.

A well-documented trail (captions in English) leads visitors around the centre: from the tortoise clinic, where wounded tortoises are treated and then released into the Maures; to the quarantine quarter and reproduction enclosures; and to the tropical conservatory, egg hatcheries and nurseries, where the young tortoises (a delicacy for preying magpies, rats, foxes and wild boars) spend the first three of their 60 to 100 years. There's also a great palaeontology trail, where vicious-looking models of the tortoise's ancestors lurk among the bushes.

In summer the best time to see the tortoises is in the morning and late afternoon (they tend to shelter from the heat during the day). Watch tortoises hatch from mid-May to the end of June; from November through to early March they hibernate.

The **Village des Tortues** (☎ 04 94 78 26 41; www.villagetortues.com in French; adult/5-16yr €9/6; ☎ 9am-7pm Mar-Nov), about 6km east of Gonfaron, is only accessible by private transport.

(population 6399, elevation 180m). This green-fingering 12th-century village is famous for its floral displays, and its **tourist office** (☎ 04 94 01 38 38; www.bormeslesmimosas.com; 1 place Gambetta; ☎ 9am-12.30pm & 3-6.30pm Apr-Sep, Mon-Sat only Oct-Mar) takes bookings for botanical walks (€9) and hikes (€7) with a forest warden in the nearby Forêt du Dom.

CORNICHE DES MAURES

From La Môle, the breathtaking 267m **Col du Canadel** (the D27) offers unbeatable views of the Massif des Maures, the coastline and its offshore islands before plummeting to the Corniche des Maures, a 26km coastal road (D559) stretching southwest from La Croix-Valmer to Le Lavandou. The shoreline is trimmed with sandy beaches ideal for swimming, sunbathing and windsurfing.

The largest **tourist office** (☎ 04 94 01 92 10; www.cavaliere-sur-mer.com; promenade de la Mer; ☎ 9am-7pm mid-Jun–mid-Sep, 9am-12.30pm & 2-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-12.30pm Sat mid-Sep–mid-Jun) along this stretch is in **Cavaliere-sur-Mer**, from where boats sail to the Îles d'Hyères in season.

Sights & Activities

DOMAINE DU RAYOL

From Le Rayol, a narrow road runs south to the beautiful **Domaine du Rayol** (☎ 04 98 04

44 00; www.domainedurayol.org; av des Belges; adult/8-16yr €7/3.50; ☎ 9.30am-12.30pm & 2.30-6.30pm Tue-Sat Apr-Sep, 9.30am-12.30pm & 2-5.30pm Tue-Sat Feb, Mar, Oct & Nov), a 20-hectare botanical garden rescued from abandonment in 1989 and stuffed with plants from around the world. The flowers are at their best in April and May, but it's always worth a visit. The admission includes a 1½-hour guided tour (in French) of the fabulous gardens and, for the truly garden-mad, there are plenty more thematic tours and guided lectures to pick from (€10 to €15; advance reservations required).

In summer you can observe underwater flora and fauna with an experienced guide along a **Sentier Marin** (Marine Trail; adult/8-18yr €15/12; ☎ Jul & Aug). The price includes entrance to the gardens, and your wet suit, flippers, mask and snorkel. Advance bookings essential.

In July and August the estate hosts occasional open-air musical soirees; again, book to ensure a place.

BEACHES

Continuing west, seaside resorts include the tiny hamlets of **Le Rayol**, **Pramousquier**, **Cavalière** and **Aiguebelle**. With the exception of busy **Plage de Cavalière**, a popular family destination, the beaches along this stretch are quiet, sandy and usually tucked in pretty coves. Tiny **Plage du Rayol** and **Plage de l'Escale** are particularly enchanting: they're backed by pine trees and have a restaurant on the sand.

CYCLING

From Cavalière a silky-smooth cycling track winds 4.5km west along the coast to **St-Cair**, the easternmost suburb of Le Lavandou.

Sleeping & Eating

Le Bailli de Suffren (☎ 04 98 04 47 00; www.lebaillide-suffren.com; av des Américains, Le Rayol–Canadel-sur-Mer; d low/mid/high season from €160/234/320; ☎ ☎ ☎) An oh-my-gosh gasp of a place wedged between beaches in an inlet right on the shore. Rooms have rich red terracotta floors, quilted Provençal bedspreads on the romantic four-posters, and spectacular sea views. The hotel has its own private slice of beach, and there are two restaurants, for alfresco lunches and sophisticated evening dinners.

Les Roches (☎ 04 94 71 05 07; www.hotellesroches.com; 1 av des Trois Dauphins, Aiguebelle; d low/high season from €200/240; ☎ ☎ ☎) The stuff of dreams: Humphrey Bogart, Jean Cocteau and Winston Churchill all stayed at this fabulous four-star

CHEZ JO

Buzzing with bare-footed, overly bronzed, sarong-clad beach lovers with a penchant for bathing in the nod and piercings in the most unexpected of places, this sizzling beach restaurant is hot stuff. Flamboyant, gregarious and not a sign in sight to tell you it's here, beach restaurant **Chez Jo** (☎ 04 94 05 85 06; Plage du Layet, Cavalière; ☎ lunch May-Sep) is one of those rare 'in the know' addresses, around for a good 30 years already. Dining is around four or five tables on the sand or on a wooden deck above the water; but don't bother dressing up, the regulars don't. Cuisine is straight from the sea and comes out from the shack of a kitchen, snug against rocks, on oversized cork platters: the grilled *langouste* (crayfish) with spaghetti (€135 per kg) and *bouillabaisse* (fish stew; €50) are legendary (order both 24 hours in advance), as is the simple but delicious grilled catch of the day (€65 per kg). Lunch ends with an espresso and a short, sharp (complimentary) shot of Jo's strong liqueur – intended to enhance the obligatory postlunch siesta on the sand. But what about Jo? He's that bronzed, potbellied bloke with long sea-swept hair, bare chest and blue trousers (no shoes) who strolls the length of the deck every so often.

hotel and restaurant that bears an uncanny resemblance to a majestic liner, moored beneath a cliff looking out to sea. The best view of it is at sea, from one of the boats in the hotel flotilla.

LE LAVANDOU

pop 5508

Once a fishing village, Le Lavandou (from the Provençal 'Lou Lavandou', meaning wash-house) is an appealing beach resort with a seemingly endless (12km) stretch of golden sand, a can't-go-wrong choice of family- and blue rinse-friendly cafés and restaurants, and boats galore yo-yoing across the water to the idyllic Îles d'Hyères.

Concrete blocks dominate the resort to the southwest, but the northeastern old town is beautifully intact. Dramatist Bertolt Brecht and composer Kurt Weill wrote parts of *The Threepenny Opera* while they were holidaying here in 1928.

Orientation & Information

Quai Gabriel Péri and its continuation, quai Baptistin Pins, runs northeast along the beachfront. The port sits at its easternmost end, opposite the old town.

Buses use the shelters either side of the D559. From there, walk one block south then turn left (east) onto av des Martyrs de la Résistance to get to the centre. Its continuation, av du Général de Gaulle, traverses the old town.

The **tourist office** (☎ 04 94 00 40 50; www.lavandou.com; quai Gabriel Péri; ☎ 9am-12.30pm & 2.30-7pm Mon-Sat, 10am-12.30pm & 4-6.30pm Sun) is opposite the port.

Boat Excursions

Tickets for *all* boats departing from Le Lavandou's **port** (Gare Maritime; quai des Îles d'Or) are sold at the ticket office 30 minutes before departure. **Vedettes Îles d'Or et Le Corsaire** (☎ 04 94 71 01 02; www.vedettesilesdor.fr; 15 quai Gabriel Péri) runs various trips, including **glass-bottom boat trips** (adult/4-12yr €12/9.20) departing every 40 minutes daily all summer. Destinations include Île du Levant (adult/four to 12 years return €23/19.10, 30 minutes, six daily July and August, two to five daily September to June); Porquerolles (€29.40/23, 50 minutes, one daily July and August, three weekly April, June and September); and Port-Cros (€23/19.10, 40 minutes, seven daily July and August, two to four daily September to June). La Croisière Bleue (a combined ticket for all three islands) costs €44/36. Boats also sail to St-Tropez (€44/36, two hours, twice weekly June to September).

Sleeping & Eating

Hôtel de l'Ilot Fleuri (☎ 04 94 71 14 82; www.ilotfleuri.com; blvd du Front de Mer; d/tr low season €49/68, high season €63/88, d with sea view low/high season €61/78; ☎ mid-Apr–mid-Nov; ☎ ☎) Two-star 'Flowery Islet' with its mimosa-topped balconies looking out to the sparkling blue sea is a real treat. Le Lavandou's oldest hotel, operational since 1928, and it sports secure, free parking – something of a novelty on the Côte d'Azur!

Hôtel Le Rabelais (☎ 04 94 71 00 56; www.le-rabelais.fr; 2 rue Rabelais; d €78 & €85; ☎ mid-Jan–mid-Dec; ☎) A rambling building overlooking the port on quai Baptistin Pins. Its pretty-in-pink façade shields a flowery garden, and breakfast is served overlooking the ocean. Streetside rooms don't have air-con.

AUTHOR'S CHOICE

La Grande Maison des Campaux (☎ 04 94 49 55 40; www.lagrandemaisondescampaux.com; 6987 rte du Dom, Bormes-les-Mimosas; d €125-150, q €220; ☎ Mar-Nov; ☎ ☎) This dreamy 17th-century country house steals the B&B show for miles around. Languishing in the heart of vineyards on the vast 128-hectare Domaine des Campaux, five spacious rooms evoke a bygone era. Beams are sturdy and age-old, a couple of bathtubs have legs, floors are original stone flags or terracotta tiles and linens are crisp white and contemporary bold. Flat-screen TVs are a given and each of the five rooms is named after a wine produced on the estate. Views are strictly green and sensational, as is the terrace out the front from which the wine-producing estate with lake and pool can be surveyed. Find it uphill at the end of a 500m crunchy gravel track, signposted on the N98 some 6km west of La Môle.

There are plenty of touristy restaurants on the waterfront, but the best eating places are the terraces in the old town. Recommended: **Chez Mimi** (☎ 04 94 71 00 85; 11 quai Gabriel Péri; ☞ mid-Jan–mid-Nov) Breakfast and apéritif spot overlooking the *pétanque* pitch from its portside perch.

La Pignato (☎ 04 94 71 13 02; 13 rue Abbé Hélin; menus €17 & €20) *Cuisine Provençale* has been dished up here for almost 30 years.

La Favouille (☎ 04 94 71 34 29; 9 rue Abbé Hélin; menus €19 & €23; ☞ Mar–Oct) Long list of regional apéritifs, aioli (€20) every Friday and great sloping tables.

Getting There & Around

Le Lavandou is on the main bus route (up to seven daily) between St-Tropez (€10.30, one hour) and Toulon (€11.60, 1¼ hours). Buses follow the coastal road, also stopping in Le Rayol, Bormes-les-Mimosas, La Londe and Hyères.

Hire wheels from **Holiday Bikes** (☎ 04 94 15 19 99; lavandou@holiday-bikes.com; av Vincent Auriol) for upwards of €10/15/45 per day for inline skates/mountain bike/50cc scooter.

ÎLES D'HYÈRES & ÎLES DU FUN

Legend says gods turned a bunch of swimming princesses into the Îles d'Hyères, and they do have a magical look when viewed from the sea. Their mica-rich rock, which glitters and gleams in the sunlight, gives them their other name, the Îles d'Or (Islands of Gold).

At 7km long and 3km wide, Porquerolles is the largest island; Île de Port-Cros, in the middle, is a national park, while its eastern sister, Île du Levant, is a nudist colony. Wild camping and cars are forbidden throughout the archipelago.

Dubbed the Îles du Fun, Bendor and Embiez, west of the Îles d'Hyères off Toulon's shores, are more sub-Disney than the stuff of myth, but make for a tongue-in-cheek day trip.

Islanders refer to the rest of France as the 'continent'.

ÎLE DE PORQUEROLLES

pop 350

Despite its huge influx of visitors each year, Porquerolles is unspoiled: 10 sq km of its sandy white beaches, pine woods and maquis are protected by the Parc National de Port-

Cros. A wide variety of indigenous and tropical flora thrive, including the requien larkspur, which grows nowhere else in the world. In winter blossoming mimosas splash the green island, with colour. April and May are the best months to spot some of its 114 bird species.

Pottering along the island's trails on foot or by bicycle, then flopping on the beach with a picnic, is a delicious way to spend a day. Avoid July and August, when the risk of forest fires makes the interior of the island and its trails inaccessible. This is also the time when the owners of Porquerolles' numerous *résidences secondaires* return to the island, increasing the population sixfold.

Smoking is forbidden outside the village.

Orientation & Information

Boats dock at the port on the island's northern coast. Walk 200m to the tourist office at the end of the jetty, then bear right along rue de la Ferme to place d'Armes, the central village square.

Maison du Parc (☎ 04 94 58 07 24; rte du Phare; ☞ 9.30am–12.30pm & 1.30–5.15pm Mon–Fri Apr–Jun & Sep, 9.30am–12.30pm & 2.30–6.30pm Mon–Fri Jul & Aug) National Park information office; organises 1½-hour guided tours of the island (adult/five to 17 years €4/3).

Post office (place d'Armes)

Société Marseillaise de Crédit (3 rue de la Ferme) ATM and currency exchange.

Tourist office (☎ 04 94 58 33 76; www.porquerolles.com; ☞ 9am–5.20pm Apr–Nov, 9am–1pm Fri–Wed Dec–Mar) Sells island maps (€1) showing the *pistes cyclables* (cycling paths) and *sentiers pédestres* (footpaths), and the plastic *Guide Sous-Marin des Espèces Méditerranéennes* to help snorkellers identify underwater flora (€20).

Sights & Activities

Central **place d'Armes** is dominated by a giant, tree-shaded *pétanque* pitch. In summer, music concerts are held in **Église Ste-Anne**, on the south of the square. Festivities fill the church and the square on 25 July, when islanders celebrate their patron saint's day.

AN ISLAND ROMANCE

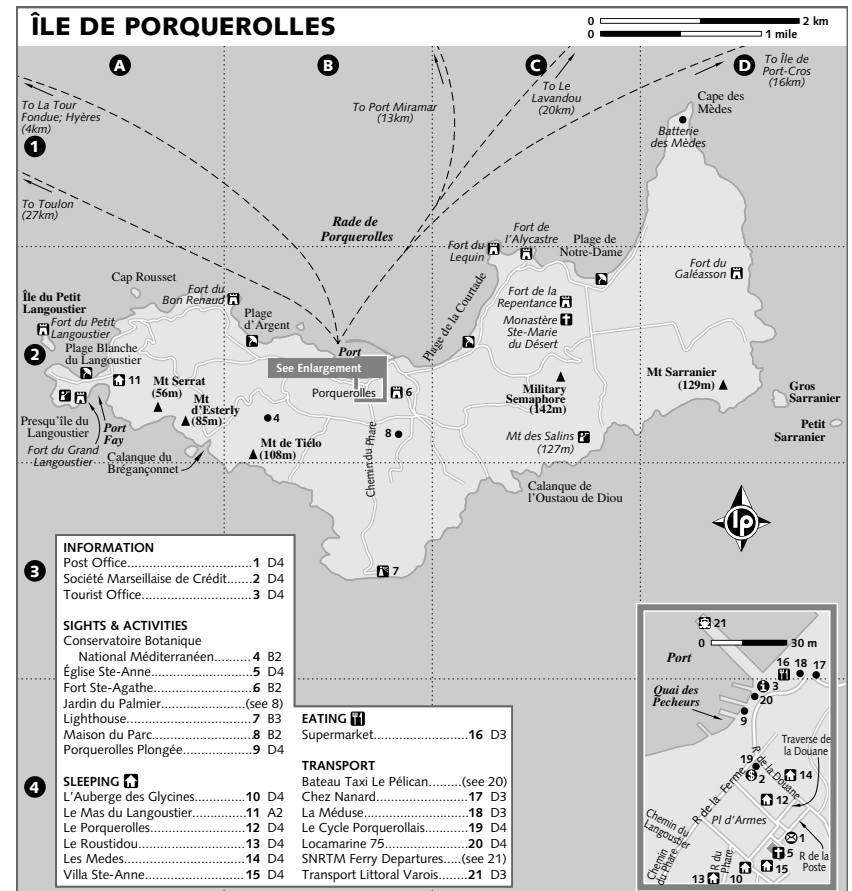
Three toasters and a bath-towel set just weren't enough. In 1911 newly married Mrs Fournier received the perfect wedding present from hubby François: the island of Porquerolles!

From place d'Armes, head south along chemin Ste-Agathe to 16th-century **Fort Ste-Agathe** (☎ 04 94 58 07 24; adult/5–17yr €3/1.50; ☞ 10am–12.30pm & 1.30–5pm May–Sep), the only fortification open to visitors. It contains historical and natural-history exhibitions, and the ticket includes access to the tower, with its eye-popping island panorama. Much of the building dates from between 1812 and 1814, when Napoleon had it rebuilt after the British destroyed it in 1739.

From place d'Armes, walk or cycle south along rue de la Ferme and turn right at the crossroads. The **Conservatoire Botanique National Méditerranéen** (☎ 04 94 58 07 24; ☞ by appointment only May–Oct), 700m along this trail, has an open-air exhibition documenting the history of island

flora, and a botanical trail that leads visitors through gardens featuring typical plants: 20 types of almond trees, 150 fig types, 83 lauriers rose types and numerous olive trees. The truly dedicated can learn all about palm tree varieties in the nearby **Jardin du Palmier** (☎ 04 94 58 07 24; rte du Phare; ☞ 9.30am–12.30pm & 1.30–5.15pm Mon–Fri Apr–Jun & Sep, 9.30am–12.30pm & 2.30–6.30pm Mon–Fri Jul & Aug), next to the Maison du Parc.

Two kilometres further along rue de la Ferme, on the tip of the cape, is the island's 82m-tall **lighthouse** (☎ 04 94 58 30 78; admission free; ☞ 11am–noon & 2–4pm Apr–Sep). Climb its winding stairs if the weather's clear for a stunning panorama from the top. A military semaphore (142m) northeast of here marks the highest point of the island; it cannot be visited.



Porquerolles' vineyards cover a square kilometre of the western part of the island, and are tended by three wine producers. Each offers *dégustation* (tasting) sessions of their predominantly rosé wines; the tourist office has a list.

BEACHES

Porquerolles' northern coast is laced with beautiful sandy beaches, including **Plage de la Courtade**, signposted 800m east from the port (follow the track uphill behind the tourist office). **Plage de Notre-Dame**, Porquerolles' largest and most beautiful beach, is 2.5km further east along the same track. **Plage d'Argent**, 2km west of the village, is popular with families because of its summer beachside café-restaurant and lifeguards. It's also the shortest walk from the port; follow rue de la Ferme, then turn right and follow the signs.

More secluded is **Plage Blanche du Langoustier**, a former lobster farm 4.5km from the village on the northern shores of the Presqu'île du Langoustier. It's called 'white' beach in contrast to the black sand that darkens the peninsula's southern shores around Port Fay – the legacy of a 19th-century soda-processing plant, which produced potash and soda from sulphuric acid and sea salt between 1828 and 1876.

Cliffs line the island's more dangerous southern coast where swimming and diving is restricted to **Calanque du Brégançonnet** to the east and **Calanque de l'Oustaou de Diou** to the west. Both are accessible by bicycle or foot.

Porquerolles Plongée (☎ 04 98 04 62 22, 06 07 40 25 02; www.porquerolles-plongee.com), at the port, organises diving courses and expeditions (first-time/night dive including equipment €48/38). The company has a catamaran, on which you can breakfast while speeding round Porquerolles and Port-Cros.

Sleeping & Eating

Porquerolles is pricey. It has no camp site and wild camping is forbidden. Hotels generally only accept guests on a half-board basis in July and August, and charge single-person supplements into the bargain. Ask the tourist office for a list of self-catering apartments to rent on a weekly basis.

Place d'Armes is armed with fruit stalls and there's a small supermarket at the port, enabling you to build a perfect picnic. Bistros and cafés abound on place d'Armes; sleeping options listed here double as restaurants.

CHAMBRES D'HÔTES

Le Roustidou (☎ 04 94 58 31 54; www.leroustidou.com; 17 rue du Phare; d incl breakfast low/mid season €95/120, 1 week incl breakfast high season €840-980) Martine and Gilles make great hosts: open the sky-blue wooden shutters to their quintessential Porquerollais cottage and peek at three delightful home-away-from-home rooms (called Orange, Yellow and Blue), a small lush Mediterranean garden and a palm tree-shaded patio to breakfast on.

Also recommended:

Les Pescadou (☎ 06 16 12 46 23; www.lespescadou.com; chemin du Langoustier; d incl breakfast €120; ☎ Mar-Jun & Sep–mid-Nov) Two rooms, rose or green; pretty patio with chairs and flowery garden.

HOTELS

Le Porquerollais (☎ 04 94 12 32 70; www.leporquerollais.com; d incl breakfast low/mid/high season €105/125/145, tr mid/high season €155/185; ☎ Feb-Nov) Six smart rooms slumber above a modern bistro at this nautically themed space, with wooden floors and fish painted on the walls up top and pasta creations cooked up by Italian Bruno at square level.

Villa Ste-Anne (☎ 04 94 04 63 00; www.sainteanne.com; place d'Armes; d low/mid/high season €140/160/190, menus €18 & €23; ☎) The main draw of this square-side inn is the imaginative salads (small/large €8/14) served in its terrace restaurant overlooking the village *pétanque* pitch; staff will lend you a set of *boules* should you fancy a spin.

L'Auberge des Glycines (☎ 04 94 58 30 36; www.aubergedesglycines.net; place d'Armes; d incl breakfast low/mid/high season from €99/149/249, d per person incl half-board low/mid/high season from €69/99/149; ☎) This absolutely charming village inn, with 11 rooms overlooking the village square and a pretty garden to boot, ranks highly in the dining stakes, too: cuisine is *Porquerollaise*, which essentially translates as 'shoals of fish'.

Le Mas du Langoustier (☎ 04 94 58 30 09; www.langoustier.com; d per person incl half-board low/mid/high season from €175/198/208, menus €55, €68 & €88; ☎) The 'to die for' choice: guests have been known to drop in by helicopter at this exceptional hotel with a glamorous history going back to 1931, vineyards and stunning views from its seaside perch. Everything, from its rooms to two restaurants (one for guests only), is impeccable.

Also recommended:

Les Medes (☎ 04 94 12 41 24; www.hotel-les-medes.fr; rue de la Douane; d incl breakfast low/mid/high season

from €79/99/129; ☎) New modern kid on the block with rooms for up to six people on a hotel or self-catering studio basis.

Getting There & Away

Regular boats operated by **Transport Littoral Varois** (TLV; www.tlv-tvm.com) link La Tour Fondue near Hyères (see Boat Excursions, p372) with Porquerolles year-round (adult/four to 10 years return €15.50/13.50). June to September, weekly boats sail to/from Toulon (p377), St-Tropez (p347) and Le Lavandou (p365).

June to September **SNRTM** (☎ 04 94 05 21 14) operates two or three boats daily from Port Miramar, south of La Londe, to Porquerolles.

Getting Around

Two options: foot or bicycle. Bike-rental costs around €12.50/9/29 per day for an adult's bike/child's bike/tandem and €12.50 a day for a *remorque* (buggy) to pedal two kids around in, or €2.30 for a child's bike seat. Outlets include **La Méduse** (☎ 04 94 58 34 27; ☎ 7am-6pm or 7pm Mar-Sep) and **Chez Nanard** (☎ 04 94 58 34 89; ☎ 7am-6pm or 7pm Mar-Sep) at the port; and **Le Cycle Porquerollais** (☎ 04 94 58 30 32; www.cycle-porquerollais.com; 1 rue de la Ferme; ☎ year-round) in the village.

BOAT

At the port, **Locamarine 75** (☎ 04 94 58 35 84; www.locamarine75.com) rents out 6cv five-person speedboats (no licence required) from €75/80 per half-/full day.

The same company runs a 24-hour boat taxi service, **Bateau Taxi Le Pélican** (☎ 06 09 52 31 19).

ÎLE DE PORT-CROS

pop 40

France's smallest national park, Parc National de Port-Cros (see the table, p76), was created in 1963 to protect at least one small part of the Côte d'Azur's natural beauty from overdevelopment. The park encompasses the 7-sq-km island of Port-Cros and a 13-sq-km zone of water around it. Until the end of the 19th century, the islanders' vineyards and olive groves ensured their self-sufficiency. Today, tourism is their sustenance. Palm trees and tobacco plants imported from Argentina line the pretty port.

The island can be visited all year, but walkers must stick to the 30km of marked trails. Fishing, fires, camping, dogs, motorised vehicles and bicycles are not allowed, and smoking is forbidden outside the portside village.

The national park also manages its westerly neighbour **Île de Bagaud**, the fourth of the Îles d'Hyères. Its 40 hectares of dense vegetation are used for scientific research and are off limits to tourists.

Orientation & Information

Boats dock at the port in the village on the island's northwestern shores.

The **Maison du Parc** (☎ 04 94 01 40 70; ☎ variable), at the port, has walking, diving and snorkelling information; and sells an island map marked with trails (€3.80) and various guides (in French) to underwater fauna and flora.

Sights & Activities

At the port, Jean-Jacques treats passengers to a 360-degree view of the sea life round Port-Cros aboard his ray-shaped, glass-bottom **Aquascope** (☎ 04 94 05 92 22, 06 08 26 91 99; adult/4-12yr €15/10; ☎ hourly 9.30am-5pm high season). Trips take 30 minutes.

Plage de la Palud, on the island's northern shores, is a 30-minute walk from the 15th-century **Fort du Moulin**. From the beach, a 35-minute *sentier sous-marin* (underwater trail; ☎ mid-Jun–mid-Sep) invites snorkellers to discover the park's marine flora and fauna, which include 500 algae species and 180 types of fish. **Sun Plongée** (☎ 04 94 05 90 16; www.sun-plongee.com), at the port, rents out masks, snorkel and flippers for €8/5 per day/half-day and also organises deep-sea dives (€36/28 with/without equipment hire). Minuscule **Îlot de la Gabinière**, an islet off Port-Cros' southern shore, is popular with experienced divers.

WALKING

From the portside post office, a track leads inland, from where 30km of footpaths criss-cross the island. The Fort du Moulin is the starting point for a circular, 1½-hour *sentier des plantes* (botanical trail) to Plage de la Palud; it returns along an inland route. This trail also takes in imposing 16th-century **Fort de L'Estissac** (admission free; ☎ 10.30am-12.30pm & 1.30-5.30pm May, Jun & Sep, 10.30am-6pm Jul & Aug), host to summer exhibitions. Climb the tower for a panoramic view of Port-Cros.

The more demanding *sentier des crêtes* (crests trail; three hours) explores the southwestern corner of the island, and the slightly easier *sentier des Port-Man* (Port-Man trail; four hours) takes walkers to Port-Cros' northeastern tip.

Sleeping & Eating

Accommodation is limited and needs booking months in advance. At the port there are six rooms with sea-facing balconies at the **Maison du Port** (☎ 06 80 32 14 16), an idyllic fisherman's house with wooden sea-green shutters. Five restaurants offering sea-inspired cuisine surround the port.

Hostellerie Provençale (☎ 04 94 05 90 43; www.hostellerie-provencale.com; d per person incl half-board low/high season €95/110; ☎ Apr–Nov; ♿) Run by the island's oldest and largest family since 1921, this bustling *hostellerie* sports five bright rooms with sunny windows facing the port; some have a balcony. Daughter Stéphanie – fourth generation to work here – tends the eye-catching cocktail bar on the waterfront. Look for canary-yellow sun umbrellas.

Le Manoir d'Hélène (☎ 04 94 05 90 52; lemanoirdortros@wanadoo.fr; d low/high season per person incl half-board from €175/200, menus €43 & €54; ☎ mid-Apr–Sep; ♿) This atmospheric 23-room manor with white turreted façade, an aloof 300m from the port, is the exclusive option. Find it in a sweet-smelling eucalyptus grove with outdoor pool and upmarket restaurant.

Getting There & Away

Le Lavandou (p365) is the main stepping stone to Port-Cros and there are also frequent boats year-round to/from Hyères (p372).

June to September, boats sail several times weekly to/from Toulon (p377) and St-Tropez (p351). There are also crossings in July and August from Port Miramar, La Croix-Valmer and Cavalaire-sur-Mer.

ÎLE DU LEVANT

pop 200

Oddball Île du Levant, an 8km strip of an island, has a split personality. Ninety percent of it is a military camp and strictly off limits, and the remaining pocket of **Héliopolis** (on the island's northeastern tip) has been a nudist colony since the 1930s. Its tiny population increases tenfold in summer, when the village is overrun with bathers baring all.

Boats dock at **Port de l'Aiguade**, home to a summer **tourist information hut** (☎ 04 94 05 93 52; www.iledulevant.com.fr; ☎ 8am–7.30pm Easter–mid-Sep). Central square, place du Village, is 1km uphill along rte de l'Aiguade, the street running along Héliopolis' southern boundary.

The post office, cafés and hotels are clustered around this square. The island's camp site, **Colombero** (☎ 04 94 05 90 29; rte de l'Aiguade; camping per person €10; ☎ Easter–Sep), is 150m from the port.

The eastern part of the colony is covered by the **Domaine des Arbousiers**, a nature reservation with rare island plants like *Eryngium tricuspdatum* (a type of thistle). A nature trail leads east from place du Village into the protected area. The tourist office has information on guided tours.

Baring all is not obligatory – except on sandy **Plage Les Grottes**, the main nudist beach east of Port de l'Aiguade. From the port, walk in the direction of Plage de Sable Levant along **sentier Georges Rousseau**, a rocky coastal path. Bold signs reading '*Nudisme Intégral Obligatoire*' mark the moment you are required to strip.

Getting There & Away

Île du Levant is 10 minutes by boat from Port-Cros. Frequent boats sail year-round from Le Lavandou (p365) and Hyères (see p372), and in July and August from Port Miramar (La Londe), La Croix-Valmer and Cavalaire-sur-Mer.

ÎLE DE BENDOR

A place of exile during the 17th century, desolate pinprick Bendor was subsequently abandoned for 250 years. Then in 1951 along came Paul Ricard, a pastis millionaire, who transformed the islet into one of the most sanitised spots on the south coast.

The islet is filled by a leisure centre, which is dominated by larger-than-life Ricard creations, including the **Espace Culturel Paul Ricard** (☎ 04 94 29 44 34; admission free), where art exhibitions are held. There's also the **Exposition Universelle des Vins et Spiritueux** (admission free; ☎ 10am–noon & 2–6pm Tue–Sun), which unravels the history and production of wine and spirits. It's the port itself that's surreal, though, with its shrunken toy-town buildings and meticulously planned alleys and squares. Its shallow-sloping **beach**, with lifeguards, is perfect for tiny kids.

Bendor lies 300m offshore from Bandol, 19km east of Toulon.

Getting There & Away

Boats to Île de Bendor depart from Bandol (adult/four to 12 years return €7/5, seven minutes, every half-hour – fewer in winter – 7am and 2am year-round).

ÎLES DES EMBIEZ

Not content with owning just one island, Paul Ricard also bought the largest of the Embiez islets in 1958 – officially called Île de la Tour Fondue but better known as Îles des Embiez. It's home to the **Institut Océanographique Paul Ricard** (☎ 04 94 34 02 49; www.institut-paul-ricard.org; adult/4–11yr €4/2; ☎ 10am–12.30pm & 1.30–5.30pm Jul & Aug, closed Sat morning Sep–Jun & Wed & Sun morning Nov–Mar), where over 100 Mediterranean species swim around in 27 sea-water aquariums and a marine museum. The rest of the 95-hectare island is occupied by a vast pleasure port, pine forest, maquis scrub and vineyards, apartment blocks and a couple of posh hotels.

The Embiez archipelago lies less than 1km off the Presqu'île du Cap Sicié, between Sanary-sur-Mer and Toulon.

Getting There & Away

Boats (adult/three to 15 years return €10/6, 10 minutes, hourly July to September, less frequent October to June) sail year-round from the small port at Le Brusac, a beach resort adjoining Six-Fours-les-Plages, 5km south of Sanary-sur-Mer.

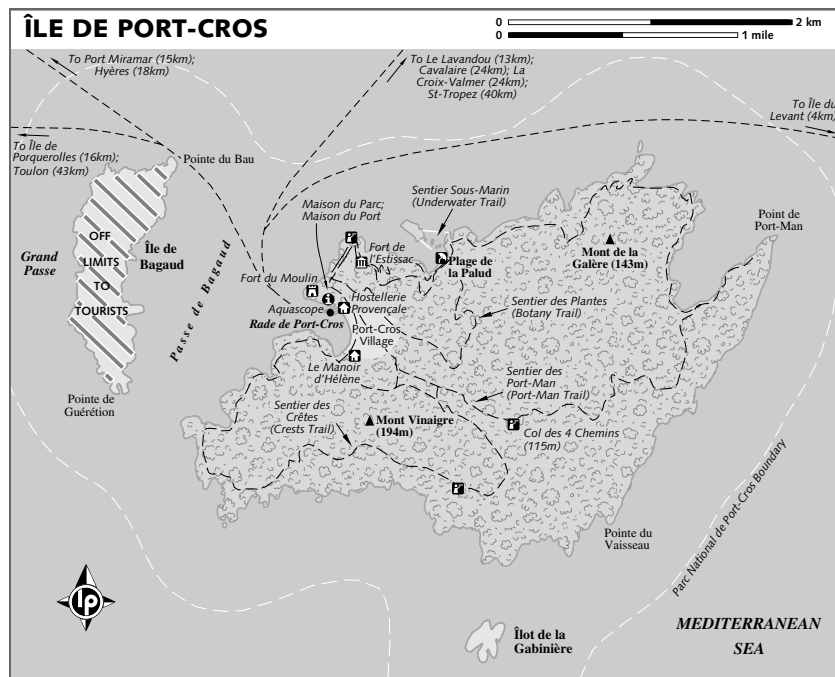
June to September there are four daily boats to/from Bandol (€10/6 return); see www.les-embiez.com (in French) for updated schedules and fares.

TOULON & AROUND

Relatively unspoilt coastline turns increasingly urban as you head west to Toulon and Marseille. A final pocket of blue and green surrounds **La Londe** (population 8840), midway between Le Lavandou and Hyères. Explore its olive groves, vineyards and flower gardens on guided walks organised by the **tourist office** (☎ 04 94 01 53 10; www.ot-lalondelesmaures.fr; av Albert Roux) or hire a bike and wine-taste by pedal power (see the boxed text, p373).

Two kilometres east, 450 species of tropical birds fly around the **Jardin d'Oiseaux Tropicaux** (☎ 04 94 35 02 15; www.jotropico.org; rte de Valcros; adult/3–12yr €8/5; ☎ 9.30am–7pm Jun–Sep, 2–6pm Oct & Feb–May, 2–5.30pm Nov–Jan), signposted off the N98.

Port Miramar, 3km south of La Londe, is a landing stage for seasonal boats (April to September) to/from Porquerolles (adult/four to 10 years €21/14) and to/from Port-Cros (€23/15).



HYÈRES

pop 52,000

With its veteran palm trees, colonial air and intact Vieille Ville (Old Town), Hyères retains much of the charm that made it the Côte d'Azur's first resort. Tolstoy took a winter 'cure' here in 1860; Robert Louis Stevenson claimed it was the only place he'd ever been truly happy in (he came here in 1886 to work on *Kidnapped*), while Queen Victoria herself breezed through in 1892.

Pink flamingos add a splash of colour to the otherwise barren landscape of **La Capte**, two narrow sand bars supporting saltpans (Les Salins des Presquiers) and a lake (Étang des Presquiers), 4km south of Hyères centre. The spectacular western sand bar road – the **route du Sel** (Salt Rd) – is only accessible in summer. Buses use the eastern bar road (the D42), the northern section of which is graced with a two-lane cycling track that runs for 2km from the beach resort of **L'Aiguade** to the roundabout in front of Toulon-Hyères airport.

At the foot of La Capte sits beach-lined **Presqu'île de Giens**, which briefly became an island in the huge storms of 1811. French poet and 1960 Nobel Literature prize-winner, St-John Perse (1887–1975), is buried in the tiny cemetery off rte Madrague, on the peninsula's northwestern shore.

Orientation

Hyères' medieval Vieille Ville is perched on a hillside north of the new town. The nearest beach is La Capte. Pleasure port, Port d'Hyères, from where boats to Le Levant and Port-Cros depart, is on La Capte's eastern shore. Boats to Porquerolles use La Tour Fondue – the port on the southeastern corner of Presqu'île de Giens.

The train station is 1.5km south of the old town. Walk northeast from the station along av Edith Cavelland to place du 11 Novembre, then north along av Gambetta, the main street into the new town; or catch the bus (p375).

Information

Cyber Espace Genyweb (☎ 04 94 33 43 86; www.genyweb.fr; 4 rue Pierre Brossolette; per 30min/1hr €2/3; ☎ 9am–9pm Mon–Sat)

Post office (av Joseph Clottis)

Tourist office (☎ 04 94 01 84 50; www.ot-hyeres.fr; 3 av Ambroise Thomas; ☎ 9am–6pm Mon–Fri, 10am–4pm Sat)

Sights & Activities

A wonderful jumble of secondhand furniture, floor tiles, clothes, olives and lavender-spiced marmalade fills **place Georges Clemenceau** during the Saturday morning market. Thirteenth-century **Porte Massillon**, on the square's western side, is the main entrance to the Vieille Ville. West along cobbled rue Massillon is beautiful arched **rue des Porches**.

Returning to the market square, walk north to 13th-century **Église St-Louis**, a fine example of sober, Romanesque-style architecture. Weave uphill to rue Bourgneuf, then walk west along its continuation, rue St-Esprit, to the limestone arch of **Porte Barruc**. From here, steps pass an iron gate to the rambling hillside grove of **Parc St-Bernard**. Remnants of the 12th-century defensive city wall and Château St-Bernard are visible.

The imposing villa below the walls is **Villa Noailles** (☎ 04 94 01 84 30; ☎ during visiting exhibitions, plus guided tours on request Wed–Mon mid-Jun–mid-Sep), designed by Robert Mallet-Stevens in 1923 for devoted patron of modern art Vicomte Charles de Noailles. Commissioned to build a winter residence 'interesting to inhabit', he created a cubist maze of concrete and glass in a Mediterranean park. The cubist garden was designed by Gabriel Guévrékian in 1925.

Back downhill along rue Barbacane is 12th-century **Porte St-Paul**. The oldest city gate, it frames **Collégiale St-Paul** (☎ 10am–noon Wed–Sat year-round, plus 3–6.30pm Mon & Wed–Sat Apr–Oct), two churches dating from the 12th and 14th centuries joined together perpendicularly. The Gothic section houses a vast collection of predominantly 18th-century, ex-votive paintings.

West of Porte St-Paul, rue St-Paul and rue Ste-Claire lead to **Parc Castel Ste-Claire**, a 17th-century convent converted into a private residence and home to American writer Edith Wharton from 1927. Today the headquarters of the **Parc National de Port-Cros** (☎ 04 94 12 82 30; www.portcrosparcnational.fr; 50 rue Ste-Claire) resides here. The grounds can be freely strolled.

BOAT EXCURSIONS

Boats operated by **Transport Littoral Varois** (TLV; ☎ 04 94 58 21 81; www.tlv-tvm.com) sail from Hyères to the three Îles d'Hyères year-round.

Gare Maritime de La Tour Fondue (☎ 04 94 58 21 81) on the Presqu'île de Giens is the departure point for **glass-bottom boat rides** (☎ 04 94 58 95 14; adult/4–10yr €12/9) that do a nonstop circuit

PEDAL-POWERED WINE TASTING

From La Londe, follow the main street south, and at the traffic lights turn onto av Général de Gaulle following signs for 'Le Port-les Îles-les Plages-Fort de Brégançon'. Continue for 400m, cross the roundabout, and carry on for 700m to **Sybil Bikes** (☎ 04 94 15 92 99; bike/tandem per day €10.50/30; ☎ 9am–noon & 2–7pm) where you can pick up a set of wheels and the start of La Londe's pea-green cycling track. Soon after, scenic views of perfectly kempt, symmetrical rows of vine – a vibrant green against the arid red soil – kick in. At the next roundabout, detour 1km to **Plage d'Argentière** for a dip in the sea and snorkel along an **aquatic nature trail** (☎ May–Sep), or continue east along the D42a following signs for 'Fort de Bregançon'.

You're now plump on the **Route des Vins de la Londe**, with pretty **Château des Bormettes** (☎ 04 94 66 81 35; www.chateaubormettes.com; rte de Bregançon), framed by nine sky-high palm trees, your first port of call on this scenic wine trail. The oldest of the 70 hectares of vines at this lumbering chateau, owned by the Faré family (they live in Paris, holiday here), were planted in 1929. Pedal 2km down the silky-smooth lane and you come to another dreamy chateau with sage-green shutters where **Clos Mireille** (☎ 04 94 01 53 50; www.domaines-ott.com; rte de Brégançon), one of the region's most highly regarded wines, has been produced since 1896. Pay €17 to €28 a bottle.

At the next junction bear right towards the fort and Bormes-les-Mimosas. Two needle pines mark the entrance to **Domaine de la Sanglière** (☎ 04 94 00 48 58; www.domaine-sangliere.com; 3886 rte de Léoube), where you can buy tasty wild boar and hazelnut terrine alongside wine. Some 200m further east is the entrance to **Plage du Pellegrin** (€7 per day), the private beach of vast, less personal **Château de Léoube**, 1.7km further down the road. Stock up on fresh seasonal fruit at the fruit stall 700m east of the chateau and carry on 200m to **Parc de l'Esagnol** (☎ 04 94 64 78 76; www.estagnol.com; per car/bicycle €7/0.50) for a picnic on its white sandy beach. Lunch done, leap back on the saddle and pedal for 500m to **Château de Brégançon** (☎ 04 94 64 80 73; www.chateaubregancon.fr; 639 rte de Léoube), a shabby old chateau with 40-year-old vines covering 52 hectares. Its Reserve du Château white is a brilliant marriage with shellfish.

Don't confuse the chateau with 16th- to 18th-century **Fort de Brégançon**, signposted 500m further east down the road along the D42d on the western side of **Cap de Brégançon**. Once in front of the heavily guarded entrance to the fort where the president of France summers (he's done so since 1968), park up (per car/bicycle €7/2) and flop out on the rocky cape's gorgeous beach, sandy **Plage de Cabsson**.

to Porquerolles and back. There are up to five sailings from Sunday to Friday, May to September.

It's also the departure point for boats to/from **Porquerolles** (adult/child return €15/13.50). Trips take 20 minutes, leaving every 30 minutes from 7.30am to 6.30pm or 7pm May to September, with six to 10 daily crossings October to April. **Porquerolles/Port-Cros two-island tours** (adult/child return €27/23) depart Monday to Friday in July and August.

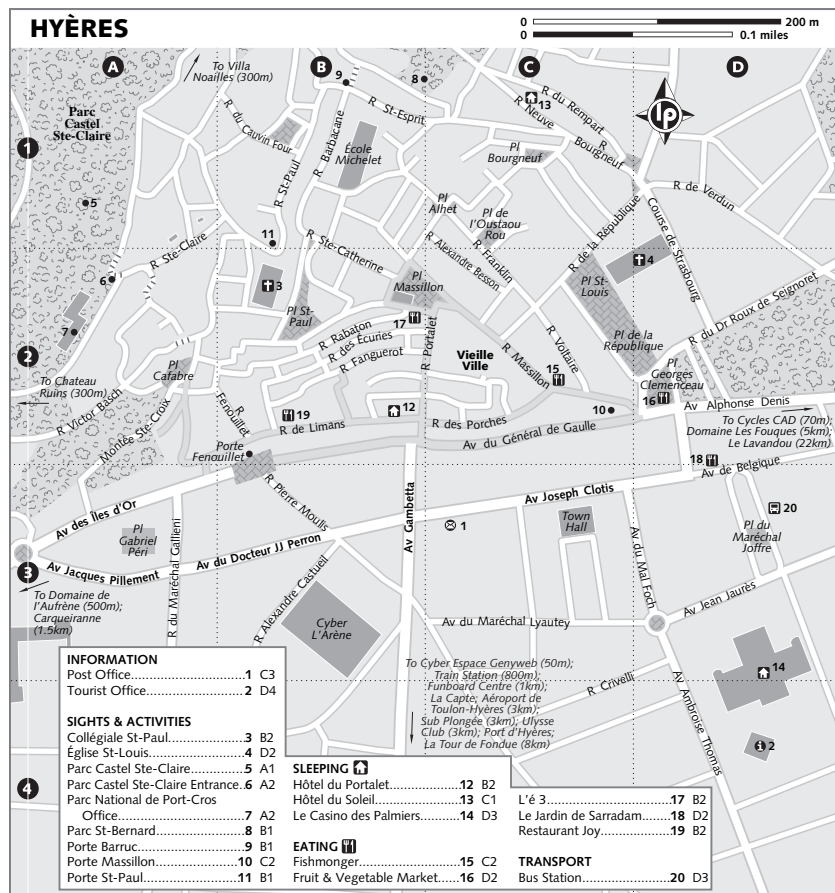
Port d'Hyères (Port de la Gavine; ☎ 04 94 57 44 07) on La Capte is the departure point for **Port-Cros trips** (adult/child return €23/20), a one-hour trip that leaves at least once daily year-round with up to four daily in high season; **Île du Levant trips** (adult/child return €23/20), taking 1½ hours, with at least one return sailing daily year-round; and **Île du Levant/Port-Cros two-island tours** (adult/child return €26/22), departing daily July and August.

DIVING

Presqu'île de Giens and Îles d'Hyères are excellent dive sites, with atmospheric shipwrecks sunk around the coast, including the *Donator* and the *Greco*. The tourist office has a list of the eight-odd diving clubs in town, among them **Sub Plongée** (☎ 04 94 58 25 30; www.sub-plongee.com; 109 rte de Giens, allée du Pousset) and **Ulysse Club** (☎ 04 94 58 25 07; www.ulyseclub.com; Port de la Madrague).

SURFING

The beaches at L'Almanarre, at the northern end of the Presqu'île de Giens, are internationally renowned for windsurfing and kitesurfing. For lessons (around €23 for windsurfing, €70 for a maiden kitesurf) and gear rental, **Funboard Center** (☎ 04 94 57 95 33; www.funboardcenter.com; rte L'Almanarre) is your all-year-round man; several other places open in summer.



Sleeping

With nine-odd sites, the Presqu'île de Giens is a camper's delight; the tourist office has a list.

CHAMBRES D'HÔTES

Domaine de l'Aufrène (☎ 04 94 65 45 89; www.aufrène.com; 83 Vieux Chemin de Toulon; d incl breakfast €80-130; (P) (B)) It might be a short 1km stroll into town, but the quintessential Provençal charm you'll find oozing out of every last 18th-century stone at this gorgeous *bastide* – which has been in Sylvie and Frank's family since 1880 – more than compensates. Its gardens, not to mention a pool and kids' play area, make it an ideal family choice.

HOTELS

Hôtel du Portalet (☎ 04 94 65 39 40; www.hotel-portalet.com; 4 rue de Limans; s/d/tr €37/42/65) There is not really that much style to this typically Provençal hotel, snug at the bottom of the hill in the Vieille Ville. But rooms are large and airy; triples tout balconies; and there are even a couple of rooms with shared toilet and shower (€33) for those travelling on a shoestring.

Hôtel du Soleil (☎ 04 94 65 16 26; www.hotel-dusoleil.com; rue du Rempart; s/d/tr/q low season from €30/40/50/60, high season from €50/70/90/100) Teetering precariously at the top of a vertical medieval street (read: not for the unfit or the suitcase-laden arriving on foot), this two-star, ivy-clad place is easily Hyères' most

charming and loveliest hotel – glowingly recommended.

Le Casino des Palmiers (☎ 04 94 12 80 80; www.europe.casinos.com; 1 av Ambroise Thomas; d/low/high season from €90/110; (P) (B)) Top-notch, four-star accommodation with all mod cons and a hint of nostalgia for the resort's golden age is what Hyères' best hotel – inside the town's plush, glass-topped casino – is all about.

Eating

The old town is restaurant-stuffed, peaking with place Massillon – one big terrace restaurant in summer.

L'É3 (☎ 04 94 28 61 02; 3 place Massillon; mains €8-12; (V) lunch & dinner) There might be no more than 10-odd dishes to pick from at this superfriendly one-man show, but every one is guaranteed to ooze imagination. Creole platters, clam and mango *brochettes* (kebabs) or a hot box of Camembert are among the colourful world-cuisine temptations. Fun, casual and overtly contemporary is the spirit of the place.

Restaurant Joy (☎ 04 94 20 84 98; 24 rue de Limans; mains €16-29, menus €17, €25 & €29; (V) lunch & dinner Mon-Sat high season, lunch & dinner Tue-Sat low season) This modern striking restaurant with a contemporary interior (partly no smoking) and menu to match is a culinary joy. Red, white and steel steal the show alongside several risottos and fantastic cinnamon-spiced foie gras in the company of onions, ginger and pineapple chutney. Cuisine is world inspired.

Le Jardin de Sarradam (☎ 04 94 65 97 53; 35 av de Belgique; tajines from €16; (V) closed dinner Sun, plus Mon low season) Mediterranean and Oriental cuisine is served in a flowerpot-filled garden near the bus station. For an Arabian Nights feel, round off your meal with syrupy mint tea poured from a silver pot.

Self-catering:

Fishmonger (rue Massillon; (V) morning only)

Fruit & Vegetable Market (place Georges Clemenceau; (V) 8am-1pm Sat)

Getting There & Away

AIR

Towards La Capte, **Aéroport de Toulon-Hyères** (Toulon-Hyères airport; ☎ 08 25 01 83 87; http://aeroport.var.ccf.fr; blvd de la Marine) is 3km south of Hyères.

BUS

From the **bus station** (place du Maréchal Joffre), **Sodetрав** (☎ 08 25 00 06 50; www.sodetрав.fr) runs seven buses daily to/from Toulon (€1.40, one

hour), Le Lavandou (€6.50, 30 minutes) and St-Tropez (€14.90, 1¼ hours).

TRAIN

From Hyères **train station** (place de l'Europe), there are around eight local trains per day to/from Toulon (€3.70, 20 minutes). The Marseille-Hyères train (€12.60, 1¼ hours, four daily) stops at Cassis, La Ciotat, Bandol, Ollioules-Sanary and Toulon.

Getting Around

TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

Sodetрав runs shuttle buses between Toulon-Hyères airport and Hyères bus station (€1.40, 10 minutes). During the summer there are also regular daily services from the airport to Toulon and St-Tropez; buses coincide with flight arrivals and departures.

BICYCLE

Rent mountain bikes at **Cycles CAD** (☎ 04 94 65 07 69; 59 av Alphonse Denis) for around €12 per day.

BUS

Buses costing €1.40 link Hyères bus station with the train station (five minutes), Port d'Hyères (15 minutes), La Capte (20 minutes), Giens (30 minutes) and La Tour de Fondue (35 minutes). Buses run almost every 30 minutes between 6.25am and 10pm.

For La Tour de Fondue (boats to Porquerolles), get off at the Tour Fondue stop. For Port d'Hyères (boats to Îles du Levant and Port-Cros), get off at Le Port stop, av de la Méditerranée.

FARM CUISINE

For lunch on the farm – an organic one at that – make a beeline for **Domaine Les Fouques** (☎ 04 94 65 68 19; rte de Hyères, Pierrefeu du Var; adult/child menu €23/11; (V) by reservation only dinner Tue & Fri Jul & Aug, lunch Sun Oct-Jun), a wine-producing estate with 19th-century palm tree-framed farmhouse, 45 hectares of vines and a gaggle of chickens, guinea-fowl, capons and ducks running around. Feast on organic farm produce in the company of a Côtes de Provence AOC white, red or refreshing rosé served by hosts Michèle and Yves Gros. Find this *ferme au-berge* 5km northeast of Hyères, signposted off the D12 to Pierrefeu du Var.

CAP DE CARQUEIRANNE

Immediately west of Hyères, pretty Cap de Carqueiranne is a partly forested stretch of headland, crisscrossed by tiny lanes. The coastal path that edges its way from the town of Carqueiranne is a particularly scenic means of exploring the cape.

Romantic images are conjured up by the **Site Archéologique d'Olbia** (☎ 04 94 57 98 28; adult/under 18yr €5/free; 🕒 9.30am-12.30pm & 3-6pm Thu & Fri, 3-6pm Tue & Sat Apr-Sep), the remnants of a sea port founded by the Greeks in the 4th century BC; there are Roman remains there too. The site is in **L'Almanarre**, at the Presqu'île de Giens' northwesternmost tip.

In **La Garonne** the **Musée de la Mine** (☎ 04 94 08 32 46; www.mine-capgaronne.fr; chemin du Bau Rouge; adult/6-18yr €6.20/3.80; 🕒 2-6pm school holidays, 2-5pm Jul & Aug, 2-5pm Wed, Sat & Sun rest of year) is a disused copper mine where the cape's mineral traditions are delved into. Local bus 91 links Toulon with the mine.

TOULON

pop 168,000

Toulon provokes the reaction a tramp might get in St-Tropez: its seedy rough-cut demeanour just doesn't fit in with the glittering Côte d'Azur. But this is a city on the move. Since becoming mayor in 2002, former government minister and passionate local Hubert Falco has pulled out all the stops to revitalise France's second-largest naval port: the dumpy old bus station has been transformed into a state-of-the-art glass affair, spiffy design-driven bars and bistros are opening, and newly planted palm trees fringe the polished central square, place de la Liberté.

Toulon is no longer so terrible. Some even like this busy port's down-to-earth grit, its buskers and street markets, its tatty bar-laden quarter near the water awash with sailors and locals, and its gaggle of fountains reflecting its watery origins: Toulon is named after Telo, a Celtic-Ligurian goddess of springs.

The city's funniest contemporary product is lovable comic actor Raimu. See his statue on place des Trois Dauphins in the old town.

Orientation

Toulon is built around a *rade*, a sheltered bay lined with quays. To the west is the naval base, and east, the ferry terminal, where boats set sail for Corsica. The city is at its liveliest along quai de la Sinse and quai Cronstadt – from

where ferries depart for the Îles d'Hyères – and in the pedestrianised old city. Northwest of the old city is the train station.

Separating the old city from the northern section is a multilane, multinamed thoroughfare (av du Maréchal Leclerc and blvd de Strasbourg as it runs through the centre).

Information

Commercial banks line blvd de Strasbourg. **Cyberespace** (☎ 04 98 00 69 11; 61 rue Marquetas; per 15min €0.70; 🕒 10am-10pm)

Hôtel Font-Pré (☎ 04 94 61 60 03; 1208 av Colonel Picot)

Post office (rue Dr Jean Bertholet) Entrance on rue Ferrero too.

Toulon Webcafé (☎ 04 94 22 95 16; http://toulonwebcafé.free.fr; 33 rue des Boucheries; 🕒 10am-10pm Tue-Sat) Trendy bar with wi-fi, several terminals and DJs mixing from 7pm.

Tourist office (☎ 04 94 18 53 00; www.toulontourisme.com; 335 av de la République; 🕒 9am-6pm Mon & Wed-Sat, 10am-6pm Tue, 10am-noon Sun Jun-Sep, 9.30am-5.30pm Mon & Wed-Sat, 10.30am-5.30pm Tue, 10am-noon Sun Oct-May)

Sights & Activities

An electric **tourist train** (☎ 06 20 77 44 42; adult/3-12yr €5/2.50; 🕒 11am & every 30min 2-4pm) chugs from the port to Pointe de la Mitre in the beach-rich suburb of Le Mourillon.

MONT FARON

Overlooking the old city from the northern side is Mont Faron (584m), from where you can see Toulon's red-roofed houses and the epic port in its true magnificence. Not far from the hill's summit rises the **Mémorial du Débarquement de Provence** (☎ 04 94 88 08 09; adult/8-18yr €3.80/1.55; 🕒 10am-noon & 2-5.30pm May-Sep, to 4.30pm May-Sep), which commemorates the Allied landings that took place along the coast here in August 1944. Historical displays and a film form part of this fascinating museum.

The Med's only cable car, the **Téléphérique du Mont Faron** (☎ 04 94 92 68 25; adult/4-10yr €5.80/4; 🕒 9.30am-7.45pm Jul & Aug, 9.30am-12.15pm & 2-5.30pm Tue-Sun Feb, to 5.45pm Mar, to 6pm Apr & Oct, to 6.15pm May, to 7pm Jun & Sep, to 5.15pm Nov, closed windy days) climbs the mountain from blvd Amiral Vence. Kids love **Zoo du Faron** (☎ 04 94 88 07 89; adult/4-10yr €8/5; 🕒 10am-6.30pm May-Sep, 2-5.30pm Oct-Apr), a wildcat breeding centre: combination zoo/cable-car tickets cost adult/four to 10 years €11/7.50.

MAKE A DAY OF IT

'Un petit coin de paradis pour amoureux de simplicité et de convivialité' ('a little corner of paradise for lovers of simplicity and conviviality') is how **Les Oursinières** markets itself – for good reason. Tucked away from the madding crowd on the southwestern shore of Cap de Carqueiranne, the tiny harbour port is picture-postcard delightful. Make a day of its charms by diving with the **Centre de Plongée du Pradet** (☎ 04 94 08 38 09; http://perso.orange.fr/cpradet), followed by lunch at legendary **L'Oursinade** (☎ 04 94 21 77 06; chemin du Pas des Gardéens; menu €39; 🕒 lunch & dinner Thu-Mon, lunch Tue), hidden on a cliff above the boats (by car follow the signs) and famed for its fabulous Toulonnais *bouillabaisse* (fish stew; €38; order 48 hours in advance), which has potatoes in it as well as a shoal of fish. Its tree-framed terrace, where meals are served, looks down onto pounding waves and the huge blue sea.

Local buses 39 and 92 link Toulon with Les Oursinières (€1.40, hourly 6.45am to 6pm), and a two-way cycling track links Toulon and the cape.

To get to the cable car, take bus 40 from place de la Liberté to the *téléphérique* stop. The tourist office has mountains of information on walking and mountain-bike trails on Mont Faron.

MUSEUMS

Top of the 'to-see' list is the **Musée de la Marine** (Marine Museum; ☎ 04 94 02 02 01; place Monsenergue; adult/under 18yr €5/free; 🕒 10am-5pm Wed-Mon), inside Toulon's lovely 18th-century arsenal building. The seafaring museum contains marvellous models of old sailing ships and paintings illustrating Toulon's history: the city only became part of France in 1481, growing in importance after Henri IV established its arsenal. In the 17th century the port was enlarged by Vauban.

An unexceptional **Musée d'Art** (Art Museum; ☎ 04 94 36 81 00; 113 blvd Maréchal Leclerc; admission free; 🕒 noon-6pm Tue-Sun) and a moth-eaten **Musée d'Histoire Naturelle** (Natural History Museum; admission free; 🕒 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 11am-6pm Sat & Sun) share the same Renaissance-style building. Small but of high calibre are the photographic works exhibited at the **Maison de la Photographie** (☎ 04 94 93 07 59; place du Globe; admission free; 🕒 noon-6pm Tue-Sat mid-Jun-mid-Sep, 1-7pm Tue-Sat mid-Jun-mid-Sep) and the temporary art exhibitions hosted by **Hôtel des Arts** (☎ 04 94 91 69 18; 236 blvd General Leclerc; admission free; 🕒 11am-6pm Tue-Sun).

BOAT EXCURSIONS

Several companies run one-hour **boat trips** (adult/4-10yr €9/5.50) around the bay and Port Militaire with a French-only commentary on events that took place here during WWII. Boats depart from quai Cronstadt.

In July and August **Bateliers de la Rade** (☎ 04 94 46 24 65; quai de la Sinse) runs a daily boat trip to Porquerolles (adult/four to 10 years €22/11) and a weekdays-only circuit of Porquerolles, Levant and Port-Cros (€30/16).

Shuttle boats run by **Réseau Mistral** (☎ 04 94 03 87 03; www.reseaumistral.com) link quai Cronstadt with towns on the peninsula across the harbour, including La Seyne, St-Mandrier-sur-Mer and Sablettes. Tickets for the 20-minute journeys cost €2 at the portside ticket office. Boats sail 6am to 8pm.

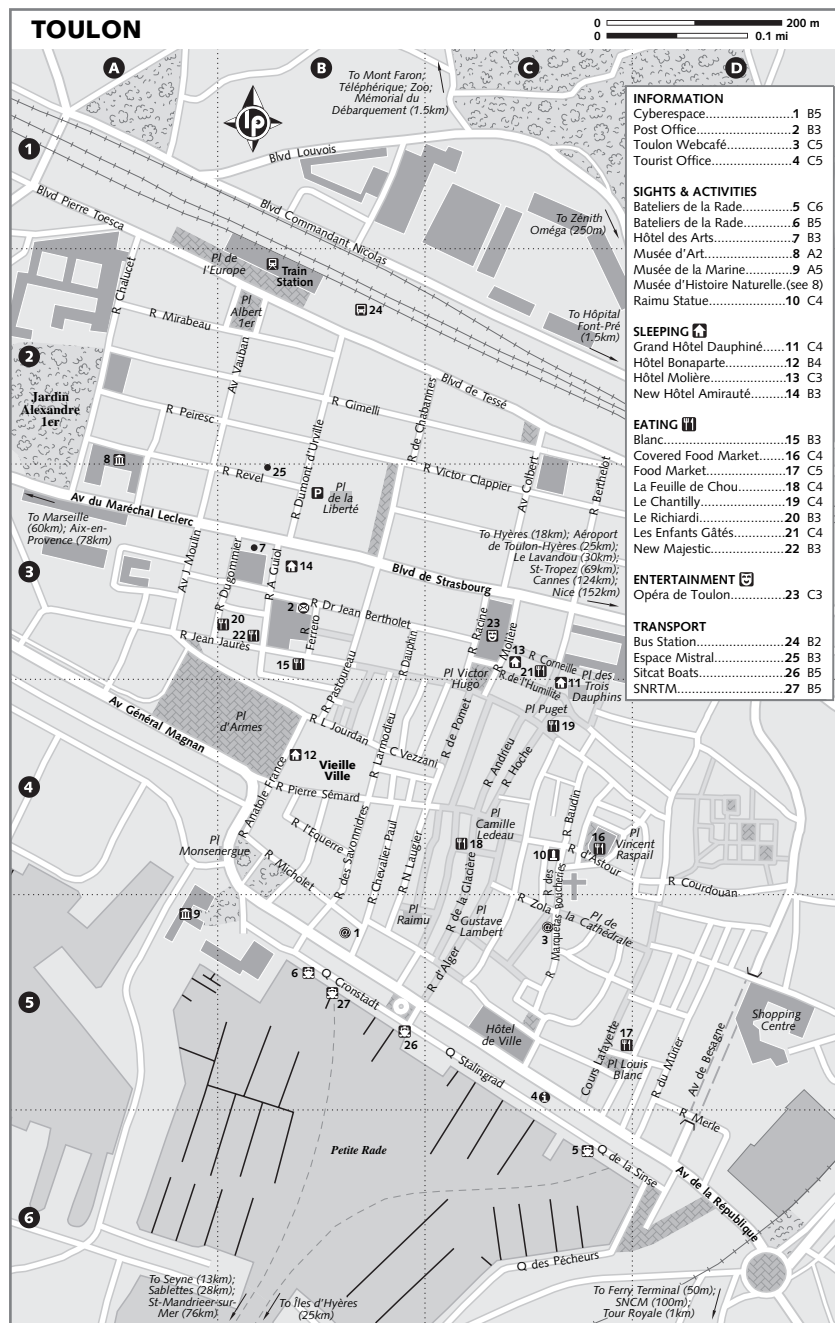
Sleeping

There are plenty of cheap options in the old city, though some (particularly those at the western end of rue Jean Jaurès) are rumoured to double as brothels.

Hôtel Molière (☎ 04 94 92 78 35; hotel.moliere@tiscali.fr; 12 rue Molière; s with washbasin €22, s/d with shower €27/32, d with shower & toilet €38-44) Evidence that living is cheap: Molière sits right in the heart of things with tiny balconies looking out onto the opera house and its bustling square. Use of the hallway shower will cost you a pricey €4.

Hôtel Bonaparte (☎ 04 94 93 07 51; 16 rue Anatole France; d €55; 🕒) Completely overhauled a few years back, this charming boutique hotel still gleams. It's well placed for the port, and the huge place d'Armes car park is just opposite. Bedroom walls are sponged yellow, and staff are sweet and cheerful.

Grand Hôtel Dauphiné (☎ 04 94 92 20 28; www.grandhoteldauphine.com; 10 rue Berthelot; s/d/tr €50/56/70; ♿) Rooms are large and comfy, and people guard your car for you (€7.80) as you sleep at this reputable midranger, part of the Logis de France chain, to boot. Better still, it's



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on a pedestrian street in the old town, meaning no screeching traffic noise.

New Hôtel Amiraute (☎ 04 94 22 19 67; www.new-hotel.com; 4 rue A Guio; s/d €78/85; ♿) Indeed a middle-of-the-road, could-be-anywhere-in-the-world chain hotel, but beggars can't be choosers in Toulon. Three stars add a bright, cheerful touch to its 38 rooms where a mix of fancy door handles and strangely shaped bed-heads relieve the business-style blandness.

Eating

Restaurants and bars with occasional live music are abundant along the quays. Another buzzing eating area is in front of the opera house on place Victor Hugo and neighbouring place Puget.

Le Chantilly (☎ 04 94 92 24 37; place Puget; mains €12.50-15; ☎ 7am-8.30pm, lunch served noon-2pm) At the 'tradition' end of the atmosphere spectrum is this century-old institution, an old-fashioned brasserie that seems to have scarcely changed since opening in 1907. Raimu loved the place, as do loyal locals who pack it full for lunch (the only meal served here).

Blanc (☎ 04 94 10 20 40; 51 rue Jean Jaurès; lunch menu incl 50¢ wine €14; ☎ lunch & dinner Wed-Sun) One of a clutch of modern and minimalist dining and drinking spaces that are creating a new buzz in Toulon, White is a bistro run by a young dynamic team, all out to impress.

New Majestic (☎ 04 94 91 61 66; 56 rue Jean Jaurès; ☎ 7am-11pm Mon-Sat) Across the road from Toulon's sleekest address sits this Italian-inspired lounge bar-cum-bistro-cum-space to hang out – perfect for an early morning coffee, lunch, afternoon ice or evening apéritif. A young team are likewise the creative force behind the funky, all-lilac, chandelier-lit interior.

Le Richiardi (☎ 04 94 64 66 39; rue Dugommier; mains €13-22, lunch menu €14.50; ☎ lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) Ceiling-to-floor windows allow passers-by to see precisely what's going on in this theatrical dining space, kitted out with crushed-velvet opera chairs and modern art on the bright white walls. Make sure you don't miss the old penguin mosaic located above the entrance.

Lovely lunch recommendations:

La Feuille de Chou (☎ 04 94 62 09 26; 15 rue de la Glacière; plat du jour €9.80, lunch menus €15-30; ☎ lunch Mon-Sat Mar-Jan) Lunch beneath olive trees on a pretty square.

Les Enfants Gâtés (Spoilt Children; ☎ 04 94 09 14 67; 7 rue Cornaille; mains €15; ☎ lunch Mon-Fri low season, lunch & dinner Mon-Fri high season) Literary café serving Provençal dishes and basil-rich Italian suppers.

Self-catering options include the **outside food market** (cours Lafayette; ☎ morning Tue-Sun) and **covered food market** (place Vincent Raspail; ☎ Tue-Sun).

Entertainment

Operas and ballets are staged at **Opéra de Toulon** (☎ 04 94 93 03 76, ticket office 04 94 92 70 78; place Victor Hugo; tickets €15-50).

Prime venue for rock, pop and big-band concerts is **Zénith Oméga** (☎ 04 94 22 66 77; www.zenith-omega-toulon.com; blvd du Commandant Nicolas).

Getting There & Away

AIR

Aéroport de Toulon-Hyères (Toulon-Hyères airport; ☎ 04 94 00 83 83; www.toulon-hyeres.aeroport.fr) is 25km east of the city.

BOAT

SNCM (☎ 3260 SNCM; 49 av de l'Infanterie de Marine) sells tickets for ferries to/from Corsica (p422) and Sardinia (p421).

See p372 for boats to or from the Îles d'Hyères.

BUS

Toulon's state-of-the-art glass box **bus station** (☎ 04 94 24 60 00; www.transports.var.fr; blvd de Tissé) is to the left as you exit the train station. Services include to/from Hyères (€1.40, 40 minutes), Le Lavandou (€11.60, 1¼ hours), St-Tropez (€18.20, 2¼ hours, seven daily) and Nice (€25, 2½ hours, two daily Monday to Saturday).

TRAIN

From the **train station** (place de l'Europe) there are frequent connections to numerous coastal cities, including Marseille (€10.20, one hour), St-Raphaël (€13.40, one hour), Cannes (€17.50, 1¼ hours), Nice (€20.80, two hours), Antibes (€18.70, 1½ hours), Monaco (€22.30, 2½ hours) and Menton (€22.30, 2½ hours).

Getting Around TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

Shuttle buses timed to coincide with flight arrivals/departures link Toulon-Hyères airport with Toulon train station (€1.40, 40 minutes).

BUS

Local buses are run by **Réseau Mistral** (☎ 04 94 03 87 03; www.reseaumistral.com). Buy tickets (€1.40/9.60 per one/10-ticket carnet) from the **Espace Mistral** (16 rue Revel; ☎ 7.30am-7pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon & 1.30-6.30pm Sat), off place de la Liberté. Buses run until 9pm but some night buses exist (€4). Sunday service is limited.

TAXI

Pick up a taxi in front of the train station or call ☎ 04 94 93 51 51.

TOWARDS MARSEILLE

Before hitting sizzling Marseille, take two in a smaller town on the way: Sanary-sur-Mer (as serene as its name suggests) or wine-rich Bandol. Wannabe racers will luurv the Circuit du Castellet, inland.

Sanary-sur-Mer

pop 17,000

Sugary pink-and-white seaside cottages in this quiet resort, 15km west of Toulon, lend Sanary-sur-Mer a settled, mumsy feel. Indeed, novelist Aldous Huxley (1894–1963) called the place home in the early 1930s, as did his biographer Sybille Bedford in the late 1930s and a host of German refugees soon after. Thomas Mann and his brother Heinrich sought refuge here, as did the German painter Feuchtwanger.

Sanary's sandy but shallow beaches get packed in summer. From the small and busy port, **Croix du Sud V** (☎ 06 09 87 47 97; www.croixdusud.com) runs weekly boat excursions west towards Cassis and its *calanques* (rocky inlets; adult/three to 10 years €24/12 for 12 *calanques*, three hours); around the Baies du Soleil (€12/6, 1½ hours) and to Îles des Embiez (€10/5, 15 minutes). Or why not try spotting a dolphin with **Regard du Vivant** (☎ 06 10 57 17 11; www.regard-du-vivant.fr; 26 blvd Henri Fabre, Marseille), an exceptional wildlife-photography outfit that leads full-day dolphin-watching expeditions (for observers and photographers; adult/child under 12 €70/55), setting sail from Sanary-sur-Mer at 9am on Sunday, May to October. See the boxed text, p73) for more information.

Inland, **Ollioules** (population 12,336), 14km north, is known for its October **Fête de l'Olivier** (Olive-tree Festival). Its **tourist office** (☎ 04 94 63 11 74; office-tourisme@ollioules.com; 116 rue Philippe de Hauteclocque) has details.

In Sanary, **Hôtel de la Tour** (☎ 04 94 74 10 10; www.sanary-hoteldelatour.com; quai du Général de Gaulle; d incl breakfast low/high season from €72/75; ♿), wrapped around a 12th-century tower (hence its name), is a particularly welcoming spot with ab fab views over the port.

Bandol

pop 7975

Ailing foreigners such as DH Lawrence and Katherine Mansfield were drawn to Bandol, 8km west of Sanary, in the 1900s. Now it's windsurfers who pour to its sandy shores to ride the waves, and wine lovers who flock to its terraced vineyards to taste Bandol's famously matchless reds, sold under their own coveted AOC since 1941.

Wine growers celebrate the year's new wine production in early December with a **Fête du Millésime** (Vintage Festival). The **tourist office** (☎ 04 94 29 41 35; www.bandol.fr; allées Vivien; ☎ 9am-7pm Jul & Aug, 9am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon Sat Sep-Jun) has a list of cellars where you can taste and buy. Bandol vineyards stretch 15km northwest of town, as far as St-Anne du Castellet.

From Bandol port **Atlantide I** (☎ 04 94 32 51 41; www.atlantide1.com; quai d'Honneur) sails to/from Îles des Embiez (adult/four to 12 years €9/5), Porquerolles (€32/16) and around the *calanques* (six/10/14 *calanques* €16/20/24), from June to September. Easter to September, it runs **glass-bottom boat tours** (€11/6, 35 minutes) around the port. Boats sail year-round to Île de Bendor (see p371).

Les Lecques

The seaside resort of Les Lecques, which is 17km west of Bandol, is unstartling apart from the remnants of two Roman villas displayed in the **Musée Romain de Tauroentum** (☎ 04 94 26 30 46; 131 rte de la Madrague; adult/7-10yr €3/1.50; ☎ 3-7pm Wed-Mon Jun-Sep, 2-5pm Sat & Sun Oct-May); be warned, parking here is difficult. The museum is arranged around three restored mosaics dating from around AD 1. Archaeologists believe that the Roman town after which the museum is named would have stood somewhere between here and **St-Cyr-sur-Mer**, 2km inland. The **tourist office** (☎ 04 94 26 73 73; www.saintcyrsumer.com; place de l'Appel du 18 Juin; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Sat, 10am-1pm & 4-7pm Sun Jul & Aug, 9am-6pm Mon-Sat Sep & Jun, 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon & 2-6pm Sat Oct-May) in Les Lecques has more information.

Circuit du Castellet

The calm and tranquillity that caresses the northern Bandol vineyards around the perched village of **Le Castellet** (population 3839, elevation 252m) is smashed with racy plomb at the **Circuit du Castellet** (www.circuitpaul

ricard.com), 2km out of town. The motor-sports racetrack was built by industrialist Paul Ricard in 1970 and sold to F1 racing magnate Bernie Ecclestone in 1999, who went on to transform it into a state-of-the-art HTTT (high-tech test track).

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