

**HIDDEN FRANCE RELAXED TOUR.
GEMS OF THE LOWER SOUTHERN FRENCH ALPS.
11 - 20 JUNE 2024 & 10 - 19 JUNE 2025 (10 DAYS)**



TOUR PRICE: £3,040
Single Supplement: £370
Maximum 7 members per tour

NO PRICE INCREASE FOR 2025

TOUR PRICE INCLUDES:

TRANSPORT

FLIGHTS from and to the UK.
MINI BUS TRAVEL for whole tour, pick up travel from and to Lyon airport.
PLUS GRATUITIES TO THE GUIDE/DRIVER.

EN-SUITE ACCOMMODATION

5 nights at guesthouse in Saillons.
4 nights at Hotel Le Carnot in Die.

FULL BOARD

Lunch day 1 to Breakfast on Day 10.
2 course Lunches or gourmet picnic with tea/coffee, includes wine, beer or soft drink.
3 course Dinners with tea/coffee, includes wine, beer or soft drink.

ALL EXCURSIONS AND ENTRANCE FEES

- Day 1 - Crussol hill top Castle.
- Day 2 - Old Bourdeaux, Comps Church plus guided walk of Poet-Laval village, and Grignan.
- Day 3 - Entrance to the Caverne du Pont d'Arc, Ardeche Canyon tour, Nougat artisan's Montelimar.
- Day 4 - Town of Crest and entrance to the Tower, Sanoflor Gardens, Gorge d'Ombleze.
- Day 5 - Tour of Romans town, then St Barnard's Church, plus Shoe Museum, Hermitage Wine tasting, visit to Valrhona Chocolate Factory with tasting.
- Day 6 - Saillons Village guided walk visit of St Geraud and the Council Hall, plus Cave Raspail and Clairette tasting.
- Day 7 - Guided walking tour of Die with visit to Mosaic Chapel and Notre Dame Cathedral, and Valcroissant Abbey.
- Day 8 - Roanne Vallery with Pennesle-Sec hamlet and Cistercian Abbey of Valcroissant.
- Day 9 - Vercors Mountain, Vassieux Prehistoric Museum, Caves of Choranche, Comb Laval scenic drive.
- Day 10 - Various options depending on flight times. Plus evening entertainment with French style Music and Singing in Saillans or in Die.



Jóna Tours



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Jóna Sparey has been organising and personally conducting tours to Iceland and around the world for 39 years, with every aspect of each holiday carefully planned. 57% of members now return for more adventures.

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Nestled between the Alps and Provence in Southeast France, the Drôme region is a hidden gem waiting to be explored. This special place is known for its tasty food, local wines and delightful treats, offering a true feast for the senses. Picture a remote and enchanting land, surrounded by mountains, valleys and clear rivers - all bathed in the warmth of the Mediterranean sun. Our journey will take you along quiet, scenic roads, avoiding the hustle of big tourist crowds, through a landscape made of closely-knit mountains, a maze of valleys and narrow gorges where the sun shines on lavender fields, vineyards, charming villages and crystal-clear rivers.

A highlight of the tour will be to experience the transhumance festival in Chatillon, to see the thousands of sheep travelling from Provence to the mountain pastures on the Vercors. Travelling on quiet narrow and scenic roads, you will get to see the Tower of Crest, one of the highest medieval keeps in Europe. In the Diois area you will explore the town of the Goddess Andarta, with its 2000-year-old walls and see its famous mosaic. A short journey across the mighty Rhône River and you will marvel at the Ardeche Canyon, and visit the UNESCO Grotte Chauvet replica where early humans painted their world over 35,000 years ago. You will also be invited to meet some local artisans: distillers making lavender essential oils, wine-growers in their farms, learn to make your own nougats with Ingrid, and much more. As we venture through this enchanting landscape we'll stay in two cosy guesthouses with comfortable accommodation, each place radiating its unique charm. Meals will be taken in local restaurants and you can expect fresh gourmet foods and fine local wines.

in a wild-west movie: so desolate, rocky and wild, home to the largest wolf and vulture population in France.

Lunch in the village of Pennes, before driving over the mountain pass, and descending into the High Diois area. Just above Luc-en-Diois village, you will enjoy a walk through the "Claps". The latter name describing a site where the entire slope of a mountain collapsed in the year 1442, creating a great natural chaos of rocks and boulders. The River Drôme flows through in a series of cascades and waterfalls. Before heading back to the hotel, one last stop to visit the old Cistercian Abbey of Valcroissant. Dinner in your hotel.

DAY 9 – THE VERCORS MOUNTAIN AND SCENIC DRIVES

French style breakfast in the hotel at the start of a long day's excursion to the iconic Vercors Mountain, one of the main mountain massifs of the Pre-Alps. The Vercors is like a prodigious natural fortress, larger than the Isle of Man, formed by high plateaus covered with pastures and old pine forests. The mountain is surrounded by vertical cliffs measuring 500 to 1000 feet.

Only a very few roads lead up to the Vercors, and all of them are listed as some of the most spectacular drives in France! From the South only one road exists, departing from Die and climbing over 3000 feet to the Rousset Pass (4265 feet). The panorama is truly breathtaking from up here, and the vegetation bears more resemblance with Scandinavia than France. A visit to the Prehistoric Museum of Vassieux, built just next to a major flint quarry and workshop, dating back 5000 years ago!

The Vercors Mountain also played a major role during World War 2, as it became a strategic choice of the French Resistance. Today, the entire mountain massif is a national park, including the largest nature reserve in France, a safe place for the most diverse Alpine fauna and flora, including the ibex, mountain sheep, lynx, and more.

Gourmet picnic lunch in the deep Bourne Valley, before a visit of the renowned caves of Choranche. A stop in the village of Pont-en-Royans to marvel at its hanging houses, built on the cliff face! The return journey will take you on one of the most vertiginous drives in the Vercors, through the cliffs of Combe Laval. Truly jaw-dropping! Dinner and night at the guesthouse.

DAY 10 – TRANSFER BACK TO LYON AIRPORT

French style breakfast in the hotel before we complete the check out. Today is the last day of your tour, but depending on flight times, a few options will be on offer, including more scenic drives across the Vercors, to reach the city of Grenoble and from there Lyon Airport.

If it wasn't done so on the first day, another option could be to explore the ancient city of Valence, by the River Rhône, and its rich heritage. In any case, your guide will ensure that you arrive in good time for check-in at Lyon St Exupery Airport.

Flight times to be confirmed. Arrival in the UK to be confirmed.



Hidden France Relaxed Tour. Gems of the Lower Southern French Alps Itinerary 11 – 20 June 2024 & 10 – 19 June 2025



DAY 1 – ARRIVAL AT LYON AIRPORT – THE DRÔME AND CRUSSOL HILLTOP

Your English speaking driver-guide will meet you at the airport arrivals hall. Transfer to the Drôme, along the famous Rhône Valley. Enjoy a two-course lunch on the way to Valence and the Castle of Crussol. Valence is the capital city of the Drôme, with an ancient Roman and religious heritage. It is overlooked by the majestic Rock of Crussol, on which stands the imposing ruins of its castle. From the thick medieval walls protecting the old town and the 12th century fortress, the panorama is truly outstanding.

If time allows, your guide will bring you to the City of Valence, for a short walking tour of its medieval district. After this you will head for the Drôme River Valley, and the town of Crest.

Check in to your guesthouse, for the first 6 nights of your stay, located in the Crest area. Time to unpack and relax, then enjoy a 3 course dinner in the guesthouse or in a local restaurant, with a welcome glass of renowned local wine.

DAY 2 – THE DRÔME PROVENCAL & HILL TOP CASTLE OF GRIGNAN

French style breakfast in the guesthouse and a full day excursion! Today we will be heading due South, into the famous Provence region. As this region constitutes the northern part of Provence, it is noticeably less crowded with visitors compared to the more frequented tourist destinations.

We will start our day with a closer look at Bourdeaux, in the heart of the Roubion Valley, especially the medieval district perched on its castellated hill, furnished with historical houses and their Renaissance façades. A stop to view the Church of Comps, a mysterious building standing alone on a large promontory.

The morning's main visit will be the ancient hilltop village of Poët Laval, listed as one of the most beautiful villages of France! Here you will find rich medieval houses magnificently preserved and restored, clustered beneath a castle built by the Knights Hospitaller of St John of Jerusalem. The guide will lead you through the narrow and cobbled streets sharing his knowledge of the sites. Lunch in the village, in a small restaurant established in one of the old medieval houses.

Another hilltop village, also listed as one of the most beautiful in France: Grignan which has many wonderful small shops where you will find local food specialties, wines, crafts, oils, leathers, clothes

and arts. The local landmark is the town's magnificent Renaissance Castle. We will visit this remarkable castle, enjoy its ambiance and panoramas, including a detour by its quirky church built inside a rocky promontory. Before heading back you will get to enjoy a walk through the narrow and winding streets, with time for shopping, or a welcome rest at a terrace for a coffee or an ice-cream. Dinner, and night at the guesthouse.

DAY 3 – GROTTA CHAUVET PREHISTORIC CAVE & THE ARDECHE CANYON

After breakfast you will be heading south-west across the mighty Rhône River: the Ardèche region and its unique prehistory heritage.

The main visit will be the internationally acclaimed Grotte Chauvet, discovered in 1994, listed as a world UNESCO Heritage Site. The original cave is not open to the public in order to preserve its unique art work, so visitors are invited to explore what has become the largest decorated cave replica in the world, designed in 2010, and opened in 2015.

It features the extraordinary collection of more than 300 paintings, drawings and engravings dating from around 35 000 years! You can also explore a state-of-the-art interactive diorama, projection room, and scenes that represent the late Paleolithic artists at work. Lunch in the onsite restaurant.

The afternoon excursion will include the famous Gorges de l'Ardèche, also called "Europe's Grand Canyon", with several stops along its twisted scenic drive and belvederes. The 30 Km long canyon is made up of a series of deep gorges. Its most renowned feature is a natural rock arch, 60m wide and 54m high. Visitors can also spot rare birds and wild goats.

On the return journey through Montélimar, if time allows, we will call into a delicious Nougat artisan workshop. Dinner in a country restaurant before returning to your guesthouse for the night.

DAY 4 – MARKET TOWN OF CREST & THE GERVANNE VALLEY

After breakfast, a scenic drive cutting through the Saou Mountain and its Nature Reserve. Saou is a very peculiar place, where an almost enclosed valley was pushed upwards into the skies... According to geologists, it is the longest and highest perched syncline in Europe!

A visit of the Market town of Crest and a scenic tour of the Gervanne Valley. Crest is the largest town of the area. A Mediterranean style medieval market town, it was built at the foot of the hills guarding the entrance of the entire Drôme Valley and its tributaries.

The narrow streets framed with houses from the Middle Ages make it very attractive, although much of it is built on a steep slope leading to its ancient fortress: the large castle of the Arnaud family. Of the impressive fort only the keep still survives. With your guide you will visit both the town (on foot) and the keep. Lunch in Crest, before a short drive to the wild hills north of the town, to explore a scenic tributary of the Drôme River: The Gervanne Valley. Beaufort sits at the edge of a plateau, leading to others above it, like giant steps leading to the massive Vercors Mountain. Each level with its own eco-system and micro-climate.

You will visit the Sanoflore Aromatic Gardens, used by a leading French brand of 100% organic parapharmacy and health products. Beyond the scenic setting of Plan-de-Baix, the guide will drive you through the impressive Gorges of Omblyze, one of the deepest of its kind in the region. High above stands the great Velan promontory, once a natural fortress to local Gauls facing Cesar. It offers an unparalleled view, enjoyed after just a short 30-minute walk. Dinner in a local restaurant, night in the guesthouse.

DAY 5 – TOWN OF ROMANS & THE RHÔNE VALLEY

French style breakfast in your guesthouse before heading on a drive to the Valence area, the only large basin in the region, dedicated to fruit growing trees such as peaches and apricots.

The guide will follow the scenic road over the Vercors Mountain fringe, and down the Limouche pass, to reach the Isère River and the large town of Romans. This is a historical and industrial town built around the massive and remarkable collegial church of St Barnard, dating from the 11th century (visit included).

A tour of the old town, through winding streets, to visit the acclaimed International Shoe Museum. Romans prosperity from the Middle Ages to very recent times was due to a thriving leather industry and tanning. The town is still known as the luxury shoe capital of France. After this visit lunch in a local restaurant including a glass of fine local wine.

We will leave Romans for the neighbouring Rhône River, and the town of Tain l'Hermitage. This area is home to one of the most famous and prized French wines of the Rhône region, in particular for the Croze

Hérmitage wine. Scenic roads wind their way through the vineyards. These vineyards are beautifully planted on numerous dry stone terraces leading up a hill. From the top the views cover much of the wine growing area and Rhône Valley. An ideal site for some Hermitage wine tasting!

But the town of Tain has yet another claim to fame, as it is also home to one of the most awarded French chocolates: the mouth-watering Valhrona Chocolate Factory. This last visit won't go amiss, including some more tasting, as much as you want!!! Back to Saillans for your dinner and overnight.

DAY 6 – THE TRANSHUMANCE CELEBRATIONS IN CHATILLON-EN-DIOIS

After your breakfast, it will be time to check-out with your luggage, as you will be moving to your second accommodation of the tour tonight.

Today will be the most leisurely day, with very little driving, in order to experience one of the best well-known traditions of this mountainous area:

The transhumance, where the locals gather to celebrate the passing of hundreds of sheep, moving up to high altitude grazing areas, all the way from their low plains near Marseille. The celebrations come together with a traditional market of local produce and crafts, together with street entertainment. Quality picnic lunch in the village of Châtillon.

The afternoon will be spent exploring another very authentic part of the Diois: the Pays de Saillans, where your guide David comes from. Starting with an easy walk along a panoramic trail, to enjoy majestic views over the Drôme Valley and across to the Vercors Mountain.

Followed by the Contècle, a deep cut gorge which brings the visitor into a secluded and enchanting valley, which has one of nature's monuments: a venerable 700-year-old chestnut tree. Then onto a visit of an acclaimed wine grower in the area: Mr Raspail, who will invite you to discover his "cave", or wine cellar, and of course sample some of his award winning "Clairette" wines.

We will finish our afternoon by a guided tour on foot of Saillans village, bringing the rich local heritage to life, including visits of the listed 12th century church of St Géraud and the listed council hall in the "Mairie", adorned with mural paintings. Check-in to your hotel, for 4 nights, with dinner.

DAY 7 – HERITAGE TOWN OF DIE & THE DIOIS COUNTRY

French style breakfast in the hotel will set you up for a day's excursion to the heart of the Voconces Country! Heading deeper into the maze of rising mountains, through great natural gateways, as we drive upstream along the Drôme river, we will come to the very ancient capital of the Voconces Nation. Established in a fertile basin, at the foot of the majestic cliffs of the Vercors Massif, is the heritage town of Die, built over 2000 years ago!

The Voconces people were of native Ligurian stock, which had adopted the Celtic culture, and mixed to form one of the many Celtic nations of the Gauls. Never completely subdued by the Romans, the latter signed a Treaty of Friendship with the Voconces, which guaranteed their autonomy within the Empire.

Prosperity soon followed, as the Drôme Valley was of military and economical importance, along the easiest route across the Alps to Italy, using the only all-year-round accessible mountain pass. Die was a Gallo-Roman capital to the Voconces. It's 3rd century stone wall is still standing today, and is one of the best examples in Europe from the ancient world.

A walking tour next, unveiling a rich past, including the 11th century Cathedral of Notre Dame, and the listed medieval mosaic located in the former Bishop's palace. Lunch in a local restaurant. The afternoon will be relaxed, allowing free time in the town with an optional drive to the village of Chamaloc, for those who wish to visit a lavender distillery, to learn all there is to know about this mountain plant, the essential oils and their benefits. Back to the hotel for dinner.

DAY 8 – THE ROANNE VALLEY & AND THE DRÔME CASCADES IN THE HIGH DIOIS

French style breakfast in the hotel before setting out on today's excursion, where nature's sites will take the front stage. And sites of natural beauty are plentiful in the Diois region! Your experienced guide will take you far off the beaten track and into the wilderness, on small roads only known to locals. Starting with the deep valley and gorge of the Roanne, leading up to the "Desert".

First stop of the day will be in Saint Benoit village, where the houses follow one single street along a promontory rock. Next we will climb a steep panoramic road leading high up on the mountains to the hamlet of Pennes-le-Sec, or "Waterless Pennes". A hamlet entirely rebuilt in the 1960's after it was deserted following the First World War. The surrounding landscape gives a strange impression of being