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WINE TOURISM

Luberon

A Luxurious Wine Escape in Provence

Away from the Riviera's glitter and crowds, Luberon offers another vision of Provence, writes **Ruma Singh**. Here are hilltop villages, centuries-old estates, and a deeply rooted wine culture that unfolds at a gentler, more seductive pace

An aerial view of Domaine des Peyres, an 18th century fortified farm and wine estate in the heart of the Luberon Natural Park



A chilled bottle of Peyre Jazz Extra-Brut with charcuterie, fresh radishes and spring onions at Domaine des Peyres

The world is full of beautiful wine regions, that make excellent wines, which are great places to visit. But sometimes, the world looks for something more: places where great wines, history and a sense of place come together. Luberon fits the bill. An appellation in Provence, that straddles the hills between Ventoux and Aix-en-Provence in southern France, away from the high-octane glamour of the French Riviera and the Mediterranean coast, it is a place of undulating hills, sunlit valleys and beautifully preserved villages perched on hilltops. The villages dominate the list of Les Plus Beaux Villages de France: Gordes, Ménerbes, Oppède-le-Vieux, Bonnieux and Lourmarin.

Known for its wines as well as its lavender, olive oil and truffles, Luberon offers a quieter, more intimate Provence than its better-known neighbours such as Châteauneuf-du-Pape, Côtes de Provence and Gigondas. This under-the-radar status is part of Luberon's appeal: it rewards unhurried travel and a gentler kind of luxury, especially for wine lovers seeking cellar doors without the crowds. As Luberon gained appellation status relatively late, in 1988, its quiet charm still feels refreshingly undiscovered.

My trip to the region was at a time when summer was fading into autumn. With wine as my focus, my first stop was **Domaine des Peyres**, a rare 18th-century fortified farm and wine estate owned by Patricia Alexandre and her husband Georges Antoun.

Alexandre, former editor-in-chief of Gault&Millau, bought the estate in 2012. At the heart of the estate was a rustic manor house, large and spacious, though in ruins at the time. But for Alexandre, its charm was still evident. Today, the domaine, in the heart of the Luberon Natural Park, produces organic AOP Luberon, AOP Ventoux and IGP Méditerranée wines over 32 hectares of vineyards.

Alexandre and her husband are passionate about art, and the grounds provide a perfect canvas for contemporary pieces. "Art is very important to us personally, so we make our personal collection available to view," she says. "Through the art, visitors can see just how important the human dimension is to us at the estate." Especially striking is the Christmas tree made of 1,000 wine bottles that greets visitors at the gate.

Archaeologists believe grapes have grown here for more than 2,000 years, and the Via Domitia, the first Roman road built in France, runs through the estate. When renovating the manor, she created apartments for guests to experience a winery stay. The five self-catered Provençal gîtes (furnished apartments) are named after the region's grapes and surround the rustic courtyard. Mine featured a fully equipped kitchen and a spacious balcony overlooking the vineyards, with a small 9th-century chapel nearby. Guests can enjoy wine tastings, follow the art trail, swim in the heated infinity pool or attend pre-scheduled jazz concerts. The chapel and grounds can also be hired for intimate



St Pierre de Mejans, a renovated 12th-century château and wine estate that includes an old priory surrounded by vineyards first planted by Benedictine monks in the 13th century

weddings, and the estate is certified HVE and has won several wine tourism awards.

In the tasting room, Alexandre's love for art is evident in the bottles. The flagship range is styled like old-fashioned newsprint in acknowledgement of her former journalism career. The red blends showcase the region's grapes: the ARTE cuvée is made from old-vine Syrah, over 50 years old, and La Gazette blends Syrah, Carignan and Grenache. The gastronomic Arte rosé is 95% Mourvèdre and 5% Carignan, aged in wood, unlike the pale pinks that dominate Provence. L'Apostrophe 2024, a blend of Sauvignon Blanc and Viognier, is vibrantly fresh. Vogue, a trendy Blouge (blanc + rouge) wine, is a chillable red made from Cinsault, Syrah, Carignan and Rolle.

For Alexandre, Luberon has all the ingredients of a perfect tourist destination. "It has a rich history, varied and beautiful landscapes, favourable weather conditions, ease of access, and, above all, the quality of comfort, charm and hospitality." (www.domainedespeyre.com)

My next stop was **Château Saint-Pierre de Mejans**, a 12th-century château and wine estate outside the pretty village of Lourmarin. Older than Avignon's Palace of the Popes, the estate houses an old priory that once sheltered the Knights Templar in the 13th century. As owner Wendy Gobbi walks me through the grounds, she points out a grave said to be that of a legendary Knight Templar. The vineyards around the priory were first planted by Benedictine monks, and the estate has over 12 hectares of vines, along with lavender and olive groves. With its golden Rognes-stone walls and expansive grounds, including a *pétanque* (lawn bowling) court and swimming pool, it provides a perfect setting for guests, whether you are seeking a quiet getaway or a range of activities. The château also sells honey, lavender oil, almond liqueur and jams made by Wendy herself.

The five suites, designed by Wendy and named after Luberon's grapes, aim to make guests feel

like royalty. Antique furnishings were carefully sourced to create quiet luxury. She adds, "Our guests are thoughtful travellers: they want to learn about the history of the château, about our winemaking process, the bees and olive trees..."

The château hosts an array of events, from wellness and yoga retreats to private intimate weddings, photography retreats, celebratory brunches and even a Christmas market. "I am open to any events that fit with the nature of the château – authentic, respectful and aligned with our overall philosophy," she adds. Having bought the estate as a *coup de cœur*, Wendy and her husband use it to showcase their love for art. "When we bought the estate in 2021, we decided to put in an art journey for guests to discover the artworks on the estate, as well as an Artist in Residence programme."

The purpose is to showcase a peaceful setting where the slow life is cultivated alongside good living. "Walks in the gardens, sipping rosé at the pool, discovering the region, enjoying great

"Walks in the gardens, sipping rosé at the pool, discovering the region, enjoying great food, are all part of the French Provençal lifestyle" – Wendy Gobbi



An ancient stone figure keeps watch over bottles of the estate's wines, framed by the quiet beauty of Provence at St Pierre de Mejans

food are all part of the French Provençal lifestyle which I so enjoy myself," says Wendy. "I love to see guests from all over the world get the chance to disconnect and reconnect with nature and peace." (www.saintpierredemejans.com)

Next: a tasting at the noted **Château La Verrerie**, founded in 1981. Valentine Tardieu-Vitali, ranked in Le Figaro's Top 50 French winemakers, runs the estate as director-winemaker, with an emphasis on precision winemaking focused on the premium end of the wine market. The château's 60 hectares of vineyards produce 220,000 bottles of award-winning Rhône-influenced wines, with freshness coming from their 300-metre altitude. "My vision is to craft wines in the vineyard – so we treat each plot as if it were unique – an approach I call 'haute couture viticulture,'" says Valentine.

A standout among the wines I tasted was La Verrerie's Grand Deffand Rosé, a deeper-

hued gastronomic rosé. Macerated on skins, it was rounded and complex on the palate, and paired perfectly with Mediterranean food. “The great strength of Luberon wines lies in their diversity: wines are produced in all three colours – red, rosé and white. The wines are blends – Syrah, Grenache and Carignan for the reds, Grenache Blanc, Clairette and Rolle for the whites.” Their most popular offering, the Chic Picnic, is a sought-after experience that takes guests through winemaking from vineyard to glass, with a detailed explanation of the Luberon terroir and its connection to biodynamic farming. (www.chateau-la-verrierie.com)

The Musée de la Lavande in Luberon captures Provence at its most evocative with endless swathes of lavender in bloom



Luberon offers much more than wine. Take, for instance, the fine lavender of Luberon, possibly its best-kept secret. This discovery may be best made at the **Lavender Museum Luberon**, owned by the Lincélé family of Château du Bois in Coustellet. The museum offers audio-guided tours, distillation workshops and a charming retail space. Sophie Lincélé, fifth-generation owner, explains, “Not all lavender is the same. Many visitors are surprised to discover the difference between fine lavender, which is rarer, more delicate and grown at higher altitude, and lavandin, which is more widely cultivated.”

The museum features centuries-old artefacts,

including historic stills, while instructional videos explain what makes fine lavender unique and how it is distilled into organic cosmetics in the laboratory in Coustellet. “Visitors discover that lavender is not only a postcard image, but also a demanding crop, a profession, a family memory and a living know-how.”

Favourite souvenirs at the shop include fine lavender essential oil, certified organic skincare and natural perfumes. Sophie adds, “Tourism is going through a period of transformation. More and more travellers are looking for experiences that are genuine, meaningful and respectful of place. What distinguishes the Luberon from other tourist regions in southern France is its sense of balance.” (www.museedelalavande.com)

The **Maison de la Truffe et du Vin**, in a 17th-century building at the top of picturesque Ménerbes, is another must-visit. Director Martine Sohet explains that the Vaucluse department, where the Luberon is located, is France’s leading producer of the melanosporum truffle, accounting for 65% of French production. Visitors can explore truffle workshops or browse truffle delicacies at the épicerie. Their wine cellar carries over 200 Luberon wines from fifty local winegrowers, sold at estate prices. The restaurant is known for truffle scrambled eggs, thin-crust tarts and truffle pasta, while the building is popular for private hire for weddings and seminars.

The Luberon has also been a land of olive trees for centuries. Introduced by the Greeks and developed by the Romans, olive cultivation has shaped the Provençal landscape for over 2,000 years. The Mediterranean climate, generous sunshine and limestone soils create olive oils of great finesse, with diverse aromatic profiles. (www.maisontruffevinluberon.fr)

The **Bastide du Laval**’s range of olive oil is organic, estate-grown and pressed in its own mill in Cadenet. The family-owned estate covers over 30 hectares of olive trees, and olives are harvested by hand from mid-October before



The restaurant at Maison de la Truffe et du Vins known for truffle scrambled eggs, thin-crust tarts and truffle pasta

The museum features centuries -old artefacts, including historic stills, while instructional videos explain what makes fine lavender unique

being cold-extracted immediately so the oil retains its flavour and richness.

Owner Léo Coupât believes, “From a gastronomic point of view, olive oil is much closer to a spice than to a simple fat.” This becomes clear as marketing head Manon Brousset leads me through the range. The oils span intensely green, fruity notes to softer, more mature profiles, and the 14 different oils are sought after by chefs from Michelin-starred restaurants and even the Élysée Palace. The Huile d’olive de Provence PDO requires strict parameters of quality, traceability and terroir.

Tasting the oils is a unique experience: the diversity and subtlety of flavours and colours is astonishing. The popular Intense, an organic extra-virgin olive oil made primarily from Aglandau olives, stands out for its aromatic intensity and pronounced notes of fresh grass, raw artichoke and tomato leaf. Tradition is produced in the historic way, while the super-premium Ardence is much sought after. The flavoured oils include basil, Herbes de Provence, truffle and other natural infusions.

The mill is open to visitors all year round for self-guided or audio-guided tours, followed by a complimentary tasting of the estate’s olive oils. Curated workshops and guided tastings can also be booked. (www.bastidedulaval.com) ♦