

Falling in love with Var

Var Provence Cruise Club has developed a new sustainable shorex product for cruise passengers. Jon Ingleton travelled to the south of France to try the eco-tours



Tourtour is considered as one of the most beautiful villages of France and offers views over Provence

There's nothing quite like leaping through a lavender field in France to lift the spirits. And with satisfaction ratings so heavily influenced by shore excursion experiences, cruise line planners will be amply rewarded for jumping into the colourful Var hinterland. But does this region have the range and depth of eco-tours for passengers to merit it being acknowledged as an eco-pioneer?

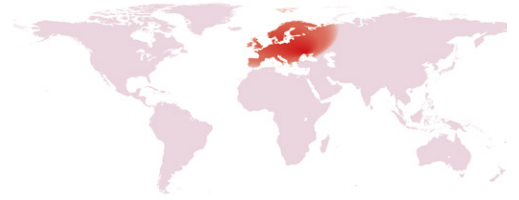
Founded by Roman military general Julius Caesar 2,000 years ago, Forum Julii was once one of the largest military ports in the Mediterranean. Today, Fréjus enjoys a more sedentary pace with an assortment of monuments being the only

redolent souvenirs of its Roman heritage. Port-Fréjus [1], the first stop on our trip, is a valid contender for smaller ships seeking a new outpost for adventures in the south of France. It is a quieter and cheaper alternative than Toulon and Saint-Tropez and has both an accommodating port and a welcoming community. All the places that we visited during our stay in France are within a 150-minute coach trip from Fréjus – some are closer if travelling from Marseille, Toulon or Saint-Tropez.

Roquebrune-sur-Argens [2] is a gift from France to the world, rich in both historical and architectural significance. This medieval town has a plentiful supply of uplifting activities and exquisite food. Kayaking on

the picturesque Argens or e-biking on the majestic Roquebrune are rightly popular activities for all ages, both led by expert and informative guides from La Base du Rocher. Back in the town, foodies will devour visits to Maison du Terroir and Maison du Chocolat et Cacao. Wine and chocolate are staples here, but what sets these two venues apart from other similar options are the fabulously entertaining hosts – easy examples of how a tour is instantly elevated by good people.

Less than an hour from Fréjus is Cogolin [3] where, according to locals, you can have “your head in the clouds and feet in the water.” Our visit was not a stopover en route to the glamour of Saint-Tropez, it was for a farm trip. Far removed from the dirty



stereotype, Jardin de la Piboule delivered an upmarket organic ayurvedic feast at an eco-farm with countless classy topical touches to highlight its sustainable credentials. The meal was enhanced by background music from the gravelly tones of a saxophonist. The farm also provides educational tours of the organic crops, including edible flowers, and there's a large greenhouse tent onsite for hot yoga sessions.

Les Arcs [4] is an 11th-century town of narrow storied streets in the shadow of the imposing Parage tower. This was a brief stop for us to visit Château Sainte Roseline, a restored winery that tells absorbing stories of wine, art and piety. Roseline's story is as remarkable in death as it was in life.

For truffle hunters Aups [6] is an assured favourite. Arguably the truffle capital of France, Aups naturally boasts tours for lovers of the 'diamond of the kitchen.' Maison de la Truffe is a recommended first stop for a complete education about the subterranean fungi and boasts a well-stocked gift shop for an essential takeaway. Once we learned how to find them, our group headed off to Le Provençal for a truffle masterclass with chef Claude Archier. A perfect egg (boiled for one hour at 63 degrees) with Claude's truffle tapenade was a culinary masterpiece.

Quintessentially French villages are everlastingly popular with cruise guests and Tourtour and Moustiers-Sainte-Marie are two particularly fine examples. Tourtour [5]

“Var has rapidly developed a compelling catalogue of green tours”



is the most extraordinary village in the sky. Officially classified as 'one of the loveliest villages in France,' Tourtour is a quiet and picturesque place with a spellbinding quality that enriches the soul.

Less than an hour further inland is Moustiers-Sainte-Marie [8], a French fairy-tale village with numerous unique characteristics that make it an unmissable treat. Nestled in between rocky peaks, the village dates back to the fifth century when monks settled in tuff caves and founded the monastery that sits higher up the mountain. A short hop south is Verdon Gorges [7], Europe's very own Grand Canyon – worthy of at least a photo stop to marvel at the turquoise water that flows into Sainte-Croix lake. Various water sports are available on the reservoir, but the buzz from sailing a catamaran at a fair speed and near-vertical angle will be hard for cruise visitors to top.

Valensole [9] is a vast lavender plateau that turns pink and purple in June and July, providing a beautiful canvas for countless

outdoor pursuits. Lavandes Angelvin is one of the region's famed distilleries, renowned for the quality of plant that grows around the 'love tree.' From here, we took electric bikes through the fields to an organic picnic. Local farmers educated us about their varied crops before we tucked into a banquet of local fare. From the fields we headed to the L'OCCITANE en Provence factory. The retailer has sold lavender to the world since 1976 and a tour of the museum and factory was an aromatic conclusion to a story about France's natural treasures.

It's easy to fall in love with Var. Countless destinations are responding to the growing appeal of sustainable tourism but few do it quite so well. While it may be generous to label Var as an eco-pioneer, it has certainly rapidly developed a compelling catalogue of green tours that will perform well against any metrics. A commitment to sustainable tourism will reap rich rewards for any destination – and Var has definitely set an impressive benchmark. **C&F**

Overnight options

Cruise guests looking for pre- and post-cruise accommodation in Var have plenty of options. We highlight two of the top contenders

L'Étoile d'Argens Ecolodge: overnight in an Ecolodge for a sustainable close encounter with the environment. A morning boat trip to the coast from the moorings at the lodge presents a selection of surprises.

Baside de Calalou: a romantic and characterful hotel with great views and wonderful food. Guests will be wishing that they had booked a longer post-cruise stay.