



VAR FROM THE MADDING CROWD

Early morning is the best time on St Clair beach. The beach boys are busy manicuring the ruffled sand outside their concessions with antique contraptions like cages on poles which leave disciplined stripes like a lawnmower; then comes the hammering-in of the parasols and the laying-out of the mattresses. Take your pick from yellow at the far end of the long curving beach, then turquoise, blue, green and maroon. The big decision comes at lunchtime; shall it be *moules* at the maroon or *fruits de mer* at the blue?

I have the whole beach to myself. If this were America, I would have to share it with earnest joggers and power-walkers, but the portly French holidaymakers are quite happy with their unfashionable bulk and bulges. There is nothing cutting-edge about St Clair. They even wear



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their bikini tops here. St Trop may be only 45 kms to the east but could be in another planet. The image of the Riviera gloss and glitter has no relevance in this stretch of the *département* of the Var, whose intimate sandy beaches, divided by rocky outcrops, shaded by palms, are an abiding unsophisticated delight.

An elderly French man potters down into the water, trailing something on a string behind him. What on earth? A tame fish? No, a thermometer. He inspects it closely. “*Vingt degrés. Trop froid, Madame*”.

Not for me, it's not. Not for the

chilly English waters. I strike out into the bay, directly in the path of the rising sun, splintering its glitter with a lazy breast stroke. To the left the mountains are still in shadow, to the right the Porquerolles islands swim in haze—a sign of a fine day to come.

Back at the Auberge de la Falaise overlooking the beach, breakfast is ready, served on the terrace under a vine canopy. After-dark dinner is a romantic affair, illuminated by candles, orchestrated by the waves. Three generations of the Brun family are involved in the auberge. Anne-Marie fills us in—what time the boats run to the islands, which are the best beaches, what is the forecast. Ask the omniscient Anne-Marie.

She reminded us that Thursday is market day in Le Lavandou, just two kilometres away by cliff path or five minutes drive. This is a weekly event worth arranging the diary around—the most important market in the Var. *Provençal* items are strongly in evidence. The olive trees which cover the surrounding hills are the source of all manner of goodies—covetable polished bowls, chopping boards, olive oils in intimidating variety and whole stalls of the olives themselves, coloured purple, black, mauve, light green and olive.

There are pipes made from the briars of the *maquis*, goats' cheeses, wine of course from the surrounding vineyards, almonds still in their pale furry jackets and herbs culinary and medicinal to cure every ailment from piles to snoring. ‘Natural Viagra’ was selling well, and bunches of the

lavender which gives the towns its name, perfumed the streets. Baby cavaillon melons were just in season, overflowing their stalls, peaches come *blanches*, *jaunes*, or *la vigne* and someone has been up early to find an astonishing array of wild mushrooms.

Post-war building has not done Le Lavandou any favours, but the core of the erstwhile fishing village remains resolutely *provençal*. There are the brightly painted old houses now converted into a lively parade of restaurants. There are the five *boules* pitches shaded by the traditional pleached limes, rightly in the heart of the little town, and there is the fountain to suggest coolness in the baking summer heat. The place to be at the aperitif hour is the Brasserie de la Plage, sipping a glass of the local rosé wine, listening to the clink of the *boules*, above the chatter of the birds calling it a day. The season, which used to snap shut in mid September, now extends for at least another month and many of the shops stay open year round to cater for the increasing number of residents who have found that they can buy an attractive villa on this coast for the price of a studio in Cannes.

Boats from Le Lavandou cross to the offshore islands; all three are delightful excursions but all are very different. For the largest, Porquerolles, take money (good restaurants) for Port Cros take walking shoes and a cozzie and for Levant take nothing at all, not even clothes (naturist colony). To the east lies a series of charming little sandy bays, some discovered only by scrambling down a rough unmarked track through the pines. Anyone who claims that the south of France is one concrete jungle has a lot to learn.

Beyond Cavalière the corkscrewing corniche road offers staggering views down to tempting coves, accessible only boat, until it descends into the little resort and beach of Le Rayol. The other side of Le Lavandou is much as nature intended—olive and cork trees punctuated by the occasional umbrella pine. *Les calanques*, rocky promontories, offer rock pool and diving platforms into crystal water. A real find. The President would agree—his summer home is here, built on an island linked by a causeway to the beach.

But there's more to the Var than beaches. Very near to the coast serious mountains add another dimension. There are lovely walks into carpets of wild flowers. In spring wild gladioli, antirrhinums and asphodels poke through the rock roses and the air is pungent with lavender, pine and thyme. Follow the mountain road which leads towards Tropez and quite unexpectedly you will come across the Auberge du Vieux Sauvage perched on an escarpment, with staggering views down to the sea. Come here for an al fresco lunch of fresh fish cooked over a wood fire, but watch the liquid intake if you plan to tackle that vertiginous drive down again.

Bormes-les-Mimosas is a pretty name for an extremely pretty village, perched defensively above Le Lavandou. Every wall is covered with bougainvillea, every tub has its oleander, every windowbox brims over with geraniums. The mediaeval cottages have been restored and freshly painted, attracting an artists' colony, steep stone steps are polished shiny, flowery courtyards encourage exploration and there is a cluster of restaurants, priced for tourists. A complete contrast is a less contrived prettiness at Collobrières, styled the Capital of the Maures. As typically provençal village as you could wish to find, its main products are wine and chestnuts. The latter appear in any guises—chestnut purée, chestnut jam, chestnut soap, and of course—*marrons glacés*. Behind an unpromising façade is a tiny restaurant that has firmly resisted any attempts to change its décor or menu. The former is dark, fusty, crowded, the former is peasant food in abundant quantity. Sometimes there is a written menu, sometimes not. Always there will be provençal dishes, like rich winey *daubes*, rabbit stews and terrines and in due season all manner of game, especially wild boar, all washed down with the excellent local wine. Customers emerge several hours later, blinking in the sunshine, happily replete, having paid a minimal bill. St Trop—eat your heart out.

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