



Rural bliss and beauty in the Ardèche

The Ardèche stretches for some 130 kilometres from Lyon in the north to Avignon in the south of France in the Rhone-Alpes region.

It is bordered by the Rhône valley and the high plateaus of the Massif Central.

This is a relatively sparsely populated area of stunning natural beauty, with dramatic mountain scenery and lush green hillsides regularly capped with the ruins of a medieval castle.

Some of the very finest of French wines are produced from the grapes grown in the many vineyards that flourish on these the fertile slopes.

The Rhone and other rivers surge through the valleys of the Ardèche in spectacular fashion, and there are many medieval hilltop and riverside villages, with 20 of these designated *Ardèche villages of character*.

Being a department slightly off the main tourist trail gives visitors to the Ardèche the chance to become immersed in true French culture, including practicing those few words of the language that we all have to hand.

www.en.ardeche-guide.com

Ashley Gibbins
Commissioning Editor
AllWays traveller





Nature's spectacle in amazing abundance

By Ashley Gibbins

It is only when one starts to travel more frequently in France that the scale and diversity of this richly enticing country becomes truly evident.

I am not sure I had even heard of the Ardèche before we decided to spend seven wonderful nights in the region.

And while the Ardèche is undoubtedly one of the lesser visited French departments, this is due to the lack of traveller awareness rather than it not meriting consideration as a travel destination.

Believe me, if you enjoy being surrounded by spectacular natural beauty, or strolling through the winding alleyways of medieval villages, or visiting bustling open air markets, or enjoying the finest food and wines you will relish a trip to the Ardèche.

Open roads and scenic routes

To really appreciate this part of France you will need to have a car. And I accept, in other parts of world, this is not always the most conducive of experiences.

Driving when on a vacation can be a frustrating experience.

One is rarely able to really appreciate what's beyond the windscreen when one's eyes need to be fixed firmly on the road ahead.

The joy of driving in the Ardèche, in complete contrast, is the startling lack of traffic.

This is a sparsely populated part of France and, once on the winding scenic routes of which there are many, one can drive for miles with only the occasional vehicle for company - in either direction.

There are also frequent opportunities to pull over, get out of the car, and be almost overwhelmed by views of the mountains ranges and tree or pasture covered hillsides or lush grass covered valleys.

We spent a good deal of our time meandering through the Ardèche in peaceful serenity.

And with the reassuring advice from the sat nav to confirm we were heading where we eventually wanted to end up.





Franglais to the fore

English is not always that widely spoken in the Ardèche and resorting to a Franglais that brought together what French we know reciprocated by whoever we were talking to.

And OK, there was also some pointing, many laughs and a little confusion long the way.

But that was the joy of it and made buying lavender on a Market stall or a beer in a bar all the more memorable.

Most of us know at least little French and, with so many English words deriving from the French language it is by no means mission impossible.

One should also plan a trip to the Ardèche to get the most from it.

Knowing what to do and see on each day will help ensure you do not leave having missed out.

We flew into Lyon, got the hire car and drove to Charmes-sur-Rhône, for three nights in the Logis de France Le Carré d'Aléthius.

This allowed us to explore the northern part of the Ardèche.

We then drove to Chandolas and spent four nights at the L'Auberge des Murets in Chandolas and, while here, we were able to explore the regions western part.

At the end of this trip we knew a great deal more about the Ardèche and its people and have become enthusiastic advocates for this tremendously welcoming part of France.

The website and images

The *Ardèche Guide* website is excellent in helping one to plan the trip and many of the images for this feature were provided by the Ardèche Tourist Board.

www.en.ardeche-guide.com



Four ways to best appreciate the Ardèche



The Pont d'Arc

While the whole of the Ardèche offers genuine natural beauty, three particular stops and a steam train ride are recommended.

The Pont d'Arc

The Pont d'Arc is a 60metre high by 30 metre wide natural entrance to the Ardèche Gorges that nature has created over many thousands of years of limestone erosion.

This is the place to spend time strolling or relaxing and watching those taking to the water here in kayak or canoe.

www.en.ardeche-guide.com/ardeche-top-ten-sights/pont-d-arc-natural-gate-ardeche-gorges

The Païolive Wood

Located near to the small towns of Les Vans and Banne, the Païolive Wood is a petrified forest of rocks in an oak wood.

There are different guided walks through the wood including a route for those with children and the cliff walk that takes you along the tip of the magnificent Chassezac Gorges.

www.en.ardeche-guide.com/ardeche-top-ten-sights/paiolive-wood

The Pont du Diable

The Pont du Diable or Devil Bridge is a Roman bridge that spans the river Ardèche and another popular beauty spot.

It is possible to drive down to the café and recreation area by the bridge or take the steep walk down (and back up again) from the village of Thueyts.

The Train of Ardèche

The Chemin de fer du Vivarais also known as Le Mastrou or Train de l'Ardèche is a mountainside railway running steam locomotives that pull historic rolling stock.

The service offers passengers the chance to view the most inaccessible part of the Doux Valley.

This is a great way to get a real feel of the scale and rugged natural beauty of this conservation area.

www.trainardeche.fr



The Train of Ardèche ©M.Rissoan-ADT07



The Païolive ©S.Bugnon-ADT07



The Pont du Diable: Wood©M.Dupont-ADT07



©M.Rissoan-ADT07

Fine wines and fabulous foods

Another abiding experience of our trip the Ardèche was being able to enjoy its fine wines paired with regions specialties - cheese, olives and sweet chestnuts.

Add to these wealth of fresh fruit and vegetables and newly baked bread and there was never a time that we dined - be it at breakfast, lunch or during dinner - without continually remarking on how absolutely delicious everything.

And as Ann will explain (below), the dining in the two hotels on route was truly sumptuous.

The Ardèche wines

Situated to the west of the Rhône Valley, the Ardèche produces excellent wines, with some 10,000 hectares designated Côteaude L'Ardèche.

The region's mild winters followed by the long, hot days of summer combine with the cool Mistral wind that travels down the Rhone to lengthen the ripening season and this has seen wine produced here for over 2,000 years.

The 2000 Vins d'Ardèche (Ardèche wines) association represents the southern Ardèche wine producers and welcome those interested in the vines and wine.

There are a number of wine routes that help enthusiastic visitors take in a number of wineries.

www.ardeche-wines.com

We managed to get to the Remy Nodin Winery, in Saint-Péray, and La Selve at Grospiéres.

Remy Nodin

Remy Nodin sits at the foot of the Château Crussol with its vines stretching up to towards the reconstructed ruins of this medieval castle.

Rémy Nodin is a 4th generation winemaker who gave his name to winery and now runs it with his Amandine, who shares his passion for wine.

Rémy's great-grandfather purchased the 600 year old building at the foot of the Crussol hill and adjacent land in 1936.



La Selve

Remy and Amandine have turned the building into a tasting room and shop for their wines and others from the Rhône Valley.

www.remy-nodin.fr

La Selve

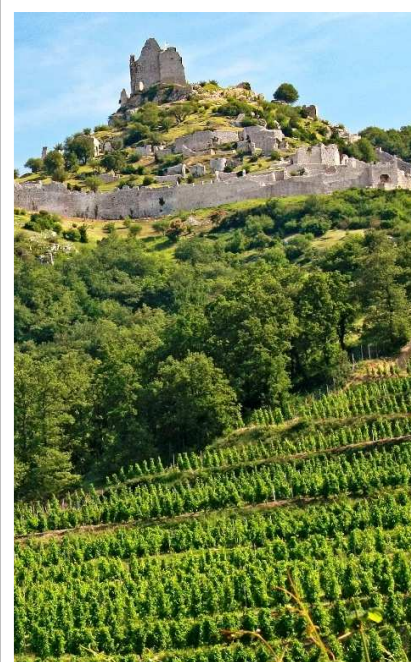
Benoit Chazallon is another young man who is passionate about wine.

In 2000 he established his winery in the grounds of the 13th Century Château de la Selve, which was a fortified house that was once home to the Dukes of Joyeuse.

Today he and his wife Florence have 40-hectares in production with his vineyards certified organic since 2008.

The 'fruits of their labours' are some of the finest wines in the region, and these can be tasted by visitors dropping by.

www.chateau-de-la-selve.fr



Remy Nodin : ©M.Rissoan-ADT07



©Ludovic Frémondère-Musée de la Lavande-ADT07

Olives



©LC-ADT07

The olive trees compete with the vines for available space on the hillside slopes and meadows of the Ardèche.

The resulting provides a wealth of fresh olives and olive oils for enjoying here or taking home.

Chestnuts

The Ardèche is rightly proud of its status as the France's main region for the sweet chestnuts, and there is ample opportunity to enjoy bread and biscuits made with chestnut flour along with gingerbread and chestnut honey, jam and even chestnut liqueur.

Castanée - the chestnut-museum



The small but fascinating chestnut-museum is housed in a 17th century monastery in the medieval city of Joyeuse.

This is where to learn about culture of the chestnut tree and see some ancient tools and machines used to gather, shell and dry the nuts.

There is also displays of furniture made from chestnut wood the 18th century, cupboards cut from the hollowed trunk.

www.castanea-ardeche.com

And finally, the other crop of the Ardèche - lavender.

This delicate blue flower grows wild around Dent de Rez Mountain and is also cultivated on the lime stone plateau and in the valleys.

When in full blossom, in early summer, the lavender the fields are covered with the purple buds and they provide a delightful fragrance.

The Lavender Museum



The Lavender Museum is found in the attractive Ardèche Gorges, near Vallon Pont d'Arc.

The daily tours of the museum are fascinating and provide a real insight into the way the essential oil extracted from lavender and many uses it is put to.

Mathias Johannesmeier-Peschier, our guide, was excellent and so genuinely enthusiastic about the cultural heritage of the lavender.

Needless to say there is the chance to purchase lavender products on site – as there is in the many outdoor markets staged in the region.

www.museedelalavandeardeche.com



©M.Dupont-ADT07

Ardèche towns come alive on market days



Street markets, which take place throughout the Ardèche, offer a great way to soak up the culture of this region.

Local producers set out their wares including specialities such as candied chestnuts, freshly picked boletus mushrooms and the full range of cold meats such as the dried sausages, hams and pork pates and local cheeses.

The markets are very much social occasions and there is invariably an excited buzz among the stalls and in the cafes, bars and restaurants.

We took in the Saturday market at Les Vans, which is one of the biggest and certainly a market with a unique atmosphere.

www.en.ardeche-guide.com/fetes-and-events/markets-flea-markets



Villages of outstanding character and charm



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An abiding memory of every visit to the Ardèche must be its many, remarkably preserved, medieval villages.

Many were once protected by 'city' walls and, though these are mostly long gone, they have served to contained development.

Many are perch precariously atop steep hill sides layered with grape vines, olive groves and fields of lavender or are found in lush valleys and besides rivers whose waters gush and cascade over giant boulders.

With their old stone houses, these villages are seemingly time locked to centuries past and have the feel of a medieval film set - without the cameras, cast, and crew.

They stand in stubborn disorderly fashion, either side of narrow, winding, cobble stone alleyways.

Wild plants and flowers grow naturally from crevices in the stonework and there is not a level surface to be found.

One cannot help but feel that, in days long gone by, the villages of the Ardèche would have been home to families resigned to a simpler and harsher way of life.

Fast forward to the 21st Century and these historically astonishing villages remain close knit communities.

While visitors are welcomed they are not always catered for and it is in the larger villages, coalescing around a 'square', where the cafes and restaurants offer the chance to sit and soak up the atmosphere while sipping a beer or wine or enjoying an invariably delicious meal.

Recognising their importance, the Ardèche tourist board has designated 20 *Villages with outstanding character* and this provides an excellent guide as to which will reward a visit.

During our stay we managed to tick quite a few off the 20 and would particularly recommend :

Chalencon

Chalencon is located very high up on a hillside overlooking the Eyrieux valley. The winding drive up is somewhat hair raising (if I had hair) and makes one realise just how remote this village is.

The drive back down is exhilarating.

Beauchastel

The old village of Beauchastel is located where the Rhône and Eyrieux merge and is laid out on different levels making for a particularly meandering stroll through.

Antraigues

The Celtic origin of its name means peak or crag and this describes a hillside village built overlooking a limestone plain. The village square has two very pleasant bar restaurants.

Banne

Banne is a castle town dating from the end of the Middle Ages with the parish church overlooking a large square where there is a fine restaurant.

Balazuc

The village of Balazuc, which sits on limestone cliffs, overlooking the river is undoubtedly one of the most attractive villages to be found here, or indeed anywhere.

Labeaume

And finally, this village on the edge of La Beaume River is surrounded by cliffs and deservedly one of the most popular of the historic villages of the Ardèche. There are some wonderful views and leisurely walks to be had from here.

www.en.ardeche-guide.com/villages-de-caractere-en-ardeche





Chateau Rocheмаure

Castles that keep a continuous watch

In addition to its medieval villages, the Ardèche has any number of ruined castles from the same period.

Many of these will be part of a village or spotted atop hillsides, with one of the most accessible and impressive being the Château de Crussol

The Château de Crussol



The Château de Crussol in the Rhône Crussol area is the ruins of a 12th century limestone castle perched 200 metres up the hill of Crussol.

From its cliff top position it offers panoramic views of the Rhône valley.

The hill has been occupied since Roman times with the first fortified building constructed during the 5th century.

The stone castle one can visit today was built in the 12th century, by a lord Gerald Basset, to control and tax traffic along the Rhône River.

Enduring a turbulent history the castle was finally sacked in the 17th century and, in 1855, a mine explosion in the quarry under the castle destroyed part of the building with lightning destroying a large part of the keep in 1952.

The hill and remains of the castle was purchased by the local authorities in the mid-1980s who have overseen the brick by brick reconstruction of the castle.

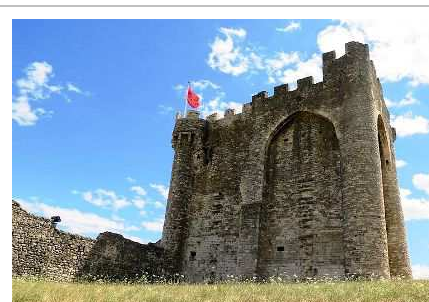
At the foot of the hill is an information centre and café. Special events are stage here throughout the year.

www.chateaudecrussol.com

Some other castles



Chateau Saint-Montan



Chateau des Moines



Chateau Rochebonne. ©M.Rissoan-ADT07



Chateau Ventadour



www.en.grottechauvet2ardeche.com

Going underground on journeys of discovery

If much of the pleasure of a visit to the Ardèche is to be found when out in the open air there are two attractions underground that just have to be included to the itinerary.

Chauvet 2 - Ardèche

The Chauvet-Pont-d'Arc Cave is located in a limestone cliff above the former bed of the Ardèche River in the Gorges de l'Ardèche, which contains some of the best-preserved figurative cave paintings in the world.

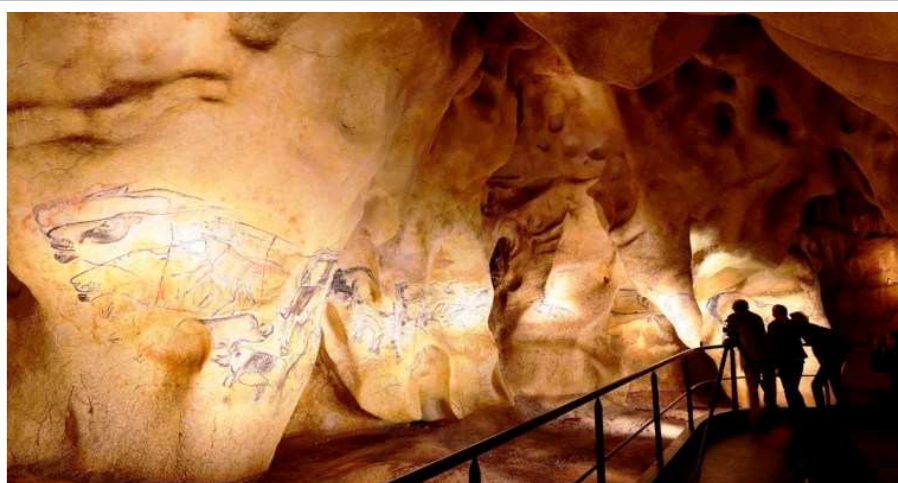
The cave and its artistic contents, which were discovered by Eliette Brunel-Deschamps, Christian Hillaire, and Jean-Marie Chauvet in 1994, were granted UNESCO World Heritage status 20 years later.

The cave paintings were created in two periods between 37,000 to 33,500 years ago and then 31,000 to 28,000 years ago.

The air and humidity entering the cave soon proved to be seriously damaging the paintings and it could never be opened to the public.

To ensure visitors could appreciate the significance of the cave paintings, safely, the Chauvet 2 - Ardèche that contains a facsimile of Chauvet Cave opened in 2015.

This perfectly reproduces the art full-size in a condensed replica of the cave and allows us to appreciate the staggering artistry of our Palaeolithic ancestors.



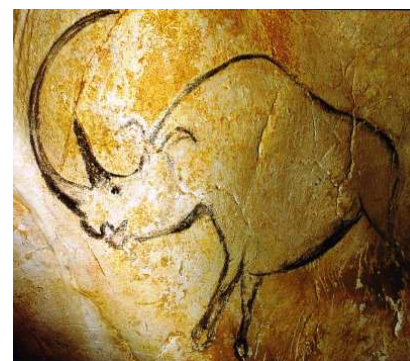
©M.Dupont-ADT07

Using the very basic methods of producing crayons and paints, and working by firelight and often under attack from cave bears and giant wolves, they created staggering representations of the animals living at the time.

Because of the excellence of the guides giving the tours, we soon forget that what we are viewing are reproductions, and can marvel at the achievement.

The overall Chauvet 2 - Ardèche complex includes an exhibition with life-size models of the mammoths, bears, lions, and rhinoceroses that lived at the time.

www.en.grottechauvet2ardeche.com



©M.Dupont-ADT07



©Damien Butaeye-Aven d'Orgnac-ADT07



L'Aven d'Orgnac

The Aven d'Orgnac is a massive cave system created a hundred million years ago from limestone rock.

The cave was discovered by Robert de Joly, in 1935 and opened it to the public four years later.

Today the cave is marketed as *naturally outstanding* and this in no way an exaggeration.

Viewing, by guided tour only, starts with a short film showing how the caves were formed.

We are then taken down to the staggering Robert de Joly chamber, which is 50 metres in height and stacked with towering stalagmites before being led into the equally magnificent Chaos and Red chambers.

It is difficult to convey in words how awe inspiring the Aven d'Orgnac is.

www.orgnac.com

Museum de l'Ardèche at Balazuc



While not taking you underground, the fascinating Museum of Ardèche displays of fossils discovered in the area and from around the world.

Visitors can view the Ardèche's oldest chestnut, eight million years ago, along with the fossils of ancestors of wild boar and horse along with the Jurassic ancestors of sharks, octopuses and rays from the dinosaur's time.

Co-founder of the museum Bernard Riou has been gathering his collection since the 1970s and together with Mehdi Bennourine will invariably be available to show visitors around.

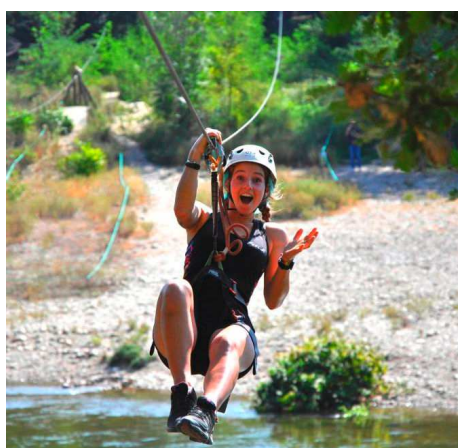
www.museum-ardeche.fr/en



Getting active in the outdoors



©M.Dupont-ADT07



©M.Dupont-ADT07

It is no surprise the Ardèche attracts those who thrive on active outdoor pursuits.

Many school and student groups head here for team bonding and character building trips during the school vacation period.

The Dolce Via, which starts at Les Ollières-sur-Eyrieux, and follows the winding Eyrieux river, is a former railway that has been converted into a green track for cyclists and walkers.

For those looking to explore the natural majesty of the Ardèche along more rugged terrain, there is a network of well laid out routes and byways.

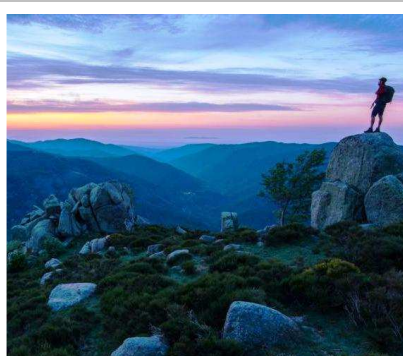
These are best suited the dedicated hiker and mountain biker.

And, with its many fast flowing rivers and streams, the Ardèche is also a popular destination for canoe and kayak enthusiasts.

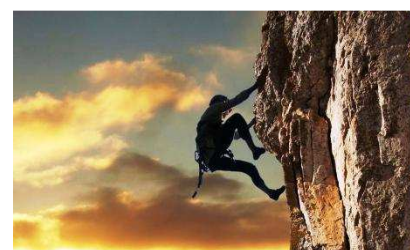
The area is also very well known for sports climbing, with many well-managed limestone and granite crags.

Zip wiring, horse riding and pot holing are also available.

www.en.ardeche-guide.com/activities



©M.Dupont-ADT07





Dining par excellence at Le Carre d'Alethius

By Ann Mealor

Tucked away in the small village of Charmes-sur-Rhone, you could easily drive past the unassuming Le Carre d'Alethius without giving it a second glance.

It is run by Olivier Samin, one of the regions top chefs, and a member of the 'Toqués d'Ardèche' culinary federation, with his wife Stephanie.

Arriving on a wet afternoon, the colourful, chic hotel provided a warm and cheerful welcome.

The reception was large, bright and furnished with quirky *objets d'arts* in a range of purples, pinks and greens.

Comfortable granite grey sofas were scattered with patterned, pastel cushions and a soothing fish tank stood next to the small bar area.

A jar of help-yourself, rose and violet, candy was placed enticingly on the welcome desk.

While I munched on the bonbons, Caroline checked us in to Pyrite, our room.

Pyrite

Pyrite was very comfortable and nicely furnished in greys, whites and gold and had everything we needed for our three night stay.

This included free wi-fi and a selection of good quality teas and coffee.

We had a very pretty terrace, ideal for relaxing on with a chilled glass of white wine.

I always enjoy the small touches and appreciated the soft, chewy nougat that was left in our room each day.

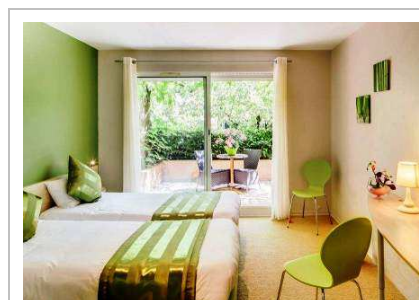
I liked it so much, that Caroline kindly stocked me up with a few extra pieces.

Breakfast

We ate a good breakfast each morning in the elegantly decorated gourmet restaurant with a patio for al fresco dining - weather permitting.

There is crusty fresh baked bread, croissants, home made jams, local honey, juicy sliced grapefruit and orange, cheese, yoghurts and free range eggs boiled, fried or creamily scrambled.

There was no need for lunch, but we were certainly ready for our dinner each evening in the hotel's one Michelin star restaurant.





©Carré d'Aléthus-ADT07

Dining the real treat

What an absolute surprise and treat it was to dine here.

Whilst seated at the table, perusing the menu, along came the amuse bouche.

This was a delightful selection of tiny mouth-watering delicacies, works of art that tasted as good as they looked.

There was poppy seed marshmallow; basil on crispy squares of bread and a refreshing, crunchy red radish with an extra dash of something special, along with a selection of warm bread rolls.

Our starter of trout, vinaigrette and lemon was a mix of textures and flavours with the wafers of crispy trout skin complementing the soft pink flesh of the fish.

The dish was beautifully presented with pearls of yellow caviar and dots of green rocket oil precisely arranged on a plate garnished with a tiny yellow flower.

The mains of Brittany fish stew with saffron and herbs were light and full of juicy sea food.

The desserts were exquisite, artistic and decadent; alluring pink rhubarb, white chocolate and almonds and a sinful strawberry fresh cream sorbet with jam and roasted sesame.

The platter of local cheeses was extensive and the sweet treats with the coffee were imaginative and addictive; chocolate lollipops with a swirl of green; soft, spongy and sugary pale yellow squares of marshmallow and delicately dipped chocolate wafer swirls.

As you would expect from a restaurant of this standard the service was excellent – efficient, knowledgeable and friendly.



Olivier and Stephanie Samin



Our sommelier was an expert in her field and chose for us a palate tingling selection of regional wines that perfectly complimented our food, including a white Saint Peray and a red Cornas.

This is a gem of a place in a beautiful setting, certainly one of Ardèche's hidden secrets.

www.lecarredalethus.com



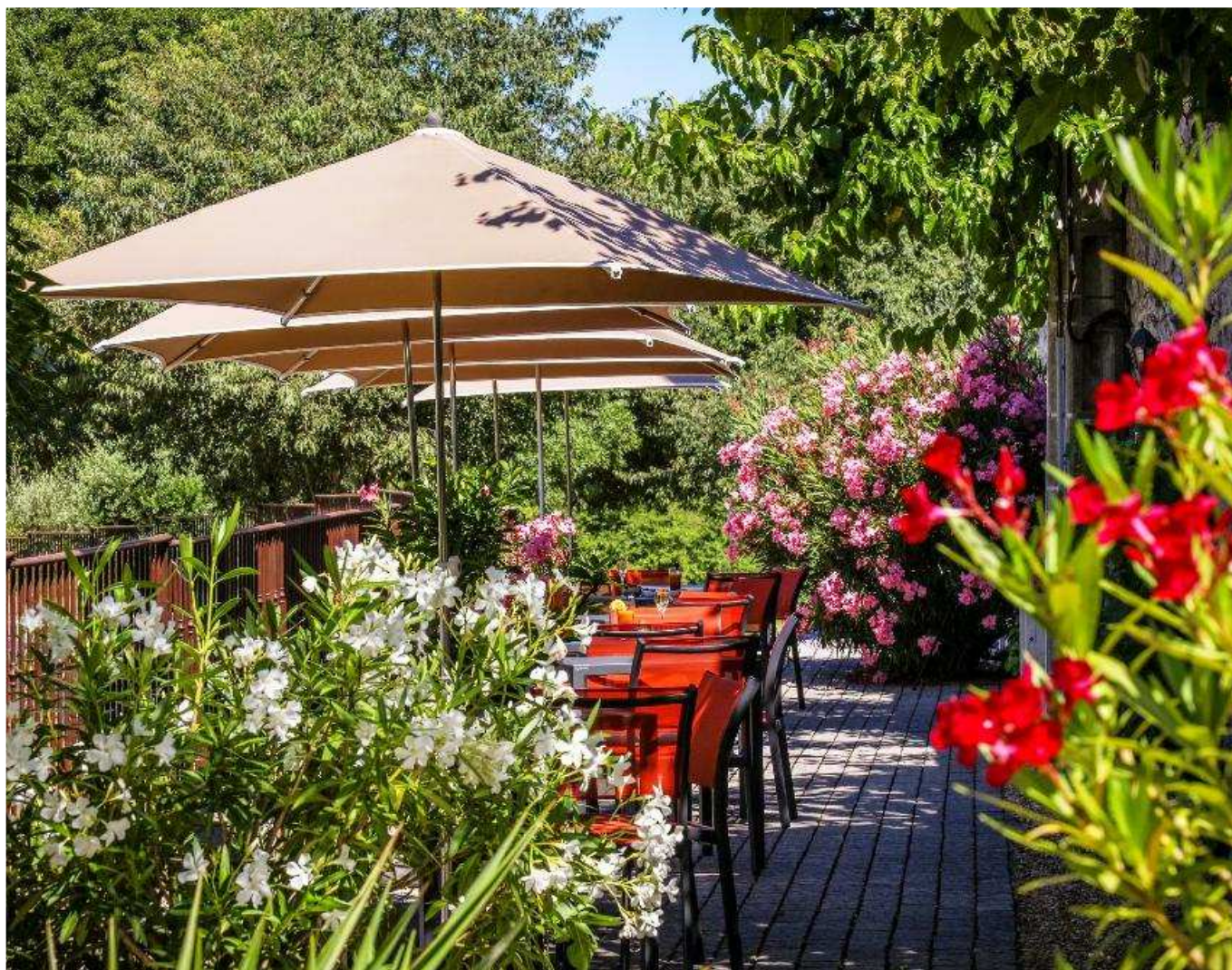
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©M.Rissoan-ADT07



©M.Rissoan-ADT07



Idyllic times at the Auberge Les Murets

By Ann Mealor

We sadly left Le Carre d'Alethius, but soon had smiles on our faces as we approached the idyllic Logis de France Auberge Les Murets, situated in the south of the region in the small village of Chandolas.

A rustic farmhouse

A charming, rustic old farmhouse, we took full advantage of its glorious setting by sitting out with a glass of wine each evening on the patio.

It was bliss gazing over the vineyard or in the small, sunny conservatory overlooking the Cevennes countryside.

As beautiful as the views were and as relaxing and calming as the Inn was, the high point of our stay was definitely the food.

And what glorious food it was.

Local, fresh, well presented, plentiful and tasty.





Breakfast

We relished our morning breakfast of fresh croissants, bread, eggs, local fruit juices, jams, honey and cheeses, meats, chestnut cake, yoghurts, spongy madeleines and moorish pain aux raisins.

It set us up for a day of intensive sight seeing.

But by the time evening came, we were ravenous.

Dinner

Chef and owner, Dominique Riganese, a 'Maitre Restaurateur', and also member of the 'Toqués d'Ardèche' culinary federation, served up a selection of traditional gourmet dishes of a consistently high standard.

These are served in the atmospheric, stone vaulted restaurant.

Always olives and crostini with tapenade to nibble on as a pre-starter and, of course, a basket of the crusty French 'pain'.

Our evening dinner never disappointed, but some favourites included the local asparagus quiche; the warm goats cheese salad with sliced apple; the roasted fillet of pork in a whole grain mustard sauce with sautéed potatoes and the fillet of trout topped with crunchy grains and seeds.

On the dessert front the strawberry tartlet, glossy with coulis and pumped to the brim with home made chantilly was my top pick.



Dominique and Anne-Catherine Riganese

But I was also more than happy to tuck into everything put before me including the chocolate fondant and the nougat ice cream.

The cheese platter, our third course, was a sight to behold bringing joy to every 'fromage' lover.

There must have been about 30 varieties for us to choose from, so many that we tried four or five different ones each meal.

The quality of the ingredients shone through in every course with presentation were excellent.

We were waited on and looked after in Restaurant Les Murets by our host Anne-Catherine Riganese and her team who were extremely professional, friendly and attentive.

Nothing was too much trouble. In the summer, when the evenings are warm, diners can eat outside in the picturesque courtyard.

It is no surprise that the restaurant has been awarded an *Assiette MICHELIN* and is extremely popular with the locals and guests.

www.aubergelesmurets.com/en



Domaine de St-Clair

Our last night in Ardèche was spent in the modern and comfortable Domaine de St-Clair Hotel, complete with golf course.

Our room had all the comforts needed for a short day and was set in very attractive grounds.

To burn off some of the calories we went on one of the many short available to guests who want a bit of outdoor exercise - in addition to golf of course.

Our evening meal was very tasty and nicely presented and we both went for the fish which was flavoursome and tasty.

At breakfast, there were meats, cheese, yoghurts, smoked salmon, bread, pastries, fresh fruit and juices to choose from on the breakfast buffet.

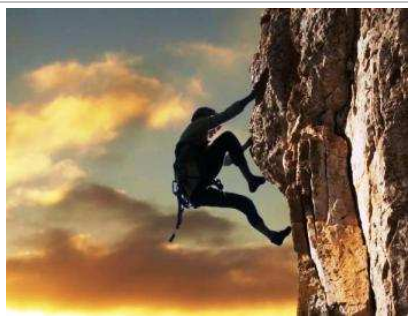
It brought our stay in the Ardèche to a very fulfilling and satisfactory end.

www.domainestclair.fr

A snapshot of the Ardèche



©L.Frémontière-ADT07



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The International Travel Writers Alliance is the world's largest association of professional travel journalists.

www.itwalliance.com



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