



Smell...



The lavender in Provence

There's nowhere like this region of France just before lavender harvest. **Lydia Bell** visits during the heady season to drink in the aromatic air.



IN A lavender field on Provence's Valensole plateau, I'm having one of those hyperreal moments. To the horizon, where late-afternoon sunbursts glimmer, a haze of purply-blue extends, linear lavender bushes merging into one glorious mélange. The air is soft and sweet, fragrant with the plant's pulse-slowing aroma and buzzing with the low, dull hum of bees.

Lavender is the lifeblood of this region. It grows on the arid Provençal mountains above an altitude of 800 metres and became known as "blue gold" when sought out by perfume manufacturers for its delicate scent. Medieval locals knew it to be a sound antiseptic, soaking sponges in its oil and burning them to ward off the plague. They also believed it protected them against evil.

The flower is seen in a thousand gardens and churchyards during the French summer but if your aim is a critical mass of aromatic purple, the Plateau de Valensole wins for sheer scale. Valensole literally translates from Latin as "valley of the sun" so brightness is de rigueur. At the end of the day, the lavender segues from pale to deep violet, exuding a bluish tinge as the sun slips below the horizon.

There's nothing quite like this part of southern France during lavender's blooming period from mid-June to mid-July. I'm here to imbibe good smells – as well as good food, wine, blessed landscapes and exquisite villages, of course. The town of Valensole, where I have spent the afternoon, is pleasingly unspoiled. Shuttered medieval stone houses, ornate fountains, pretty chapels, shaded squares and ancient gardens offer beauty for the eyes. The shopping is great, too; everywhere, artisanal stores sell lavender-based products. Truffles, honeys and nougats add to the gourmet smorgasbord. Lavender also creeps into the food, scenting the crème brûlée and the homemade ice-cream.

I'm staying south of here in Le Petit Luberon, near Ménerbes, the erstwhile home of the late British author Peter Mayle, who penned *A Year in Provence*. After his memoir's success, Mayle became so fed up with tourists appearing at his front door, he moved. But his Provençal landscape hasn't changed much. The valleys, mountains, vineyards and lavender fields remain. There are just more restaurants, shops and chic places to stay.

Ludicrously idyllic La Bastide de Marie (labastide demarie.com) is a case in point and had me at "Bonjour!" Part of the Maisons & Hotels Sibuet group of five-star boutique hotels, it exudes a rustic but knowing beauty. This 15-room-and-suite 18th-century *mas* (farmhouse)

down a cypress- and lavender-lined driveway includes a well-stocked wine cellar (including from its next-door Domaine de Marie winery), a spa and a charming little clothing and accessories shop. The house is decorated with elegant objets d'art and there are two swimming pools enclosed by stone walls.

The restaurant (sample evening menu, not for those on a diet: duck terrine followed by pigeon) nestles under shading trees and is banked by topiary and glistening vines. My home is La Roulotte – an eccentric little gypsy caravan set at the end of the 23-hectare vineyard.

I snake around country lanes in my hire car and through lavender fields on the hotel's free e-bikes in the 40°C heat, agog at the villages of Goult, Lacoste, Coustellet and Gordes. I wander through the markets at Bonnieux, Lourmarin and Roussillon, with their scented strawberries and peaches, and Provençal herbs and breads. At Fontaine-de-Vaucluse, overlooking emerald-green river waters, I drink citron pressé. (For the uninitiated, that's a tall glass filled with ice, a pitcher of water and some sugar cubes. The waiter squeezes an entire juicy lemon into your glass and then strolls off, leaving you to figure out the rest.) At the Abbaye Notre-Dame de Sénanque, where a Cistercian order of monks has prayed seven times a day for 900 years and cultivate lavender, olives and honey, I sigh at the clouds of lavender whose aroma fills the balmy air outside.

In search of untouristy Provence, I head to what some refer to as "Provence Occidental" – that is, Western Provence. Here, a new hotel has opened that's over the border in Languedoc-Roussillon but only five minutes from "official" Provence, on the cusp of Avignon and the Ardèche. While you won't be able to move in Provence proper during summer, Château de Montcaud (hotel.qantas.com.au/chateaudemontcaud), an old silk merchant's pile, is quiet and restful.

Swiss hotelier Rolf Bertschi and his wife, Andrea, have created a miniature version of a world-class hotel at Château de Montcaud, painting impeccably process-driven detail and standards onto a gorgeous Southern French canvas. Bertschi is obsessed with amazing produce, presentation and kitchen talent, scouring his connections to find Matthieu Hervé, just 33 years old, a rising talent and former protégé of renowned chef Daniel Boulud, to head up his kitchen.

At their alfresco fine-diner, I have possibly my favourite dish ever: Arctic char with horseradish, salicorn and a granny smith emulsion. There's also a bistro with a village atmosphere. Bertschi once argued with Hervé about being allowed to stage brunches – e65

The grounds of a farmhouse overlooking the hills of Luberon



A shady square in the 11th-century Provençal town of Gordes (left); fresh lavender (above)

(about \$104) with champagne and coffee included – but he won and the chef now agrees it's a lovely institution, with tables under the chestnut trees and live jazz.

Bertschi has great affection for his corner of the country. "Life is slower here," he tells me. "It's more like France was 20 years ago, with no other luxury hotel within a 20-kilometre radius." Andrea has conceived a perfume project inspired by the chateau's roots, with the fruits of her labours only available to buy here.

I swim at the spectacular Cascades du Sautadet, where waterfalls plunge into the river Cèze and around limestone formations eroded into odd shapes, and visit the Monastery of Chartreuse de Valbonne (chartreuse-de-valbonne.com), before popping around the corner to lavender producer Domaine de Vilgoutrès. The dreamy realm of Jacqueline and René Frach, Vilgoutrès has been in their family for more than a century. They grow lavender next to their farmhouse and have a shop in a cave, where they sell essential oils and products of the region, including olive oils and organic toiletries.

She asks for cash, as there is no credit card machine. And when I ask if she has a website, she raises her shoulders, turns out her palms and pouts her lips in the French *pouf!* "We sell things," she says, kindly dismissing me. "People come." I'm reminded of what Peter Mayle wrote of life in Provence: "Time passed in a haze of wellbeing; long, slow, almost torpid days when it was so enjoyable to be alive that nothing else mattered." ●

Flower power

Five other places that will delight your sense of smell.

Kazanlak, Bulgaria

The Valley of Roses

The heavily scented damask rose has given its name to Bulgaria's rain-blessed Valley of the Roses, where the blossom flowers from mid-May to mid-June before being picked for its exquisite oil. The best place to experience the joy of harvest is the town of Kazanlak, where a rose festival has been held annually since 1903. A local girl is crowned Queen of Roses and there are parades and folk dancing.

Grasse, France

Fête du Jasmin

Jasmine is a key ingredient for Grasse's famed perfumiers and a festival to celebrate this fragrant bloom is held each August. There are pageants, flower stalls and fireworks. The splendid scents of other flowers grown here, including mimosa, lavender, orange blossom and rose, also linger in the air.

Delhi, India

Phool Mandi Flower Market

The most magnificent flower market in Asia, Phool Mandi offers up everything sacred and scented, from lilies and tuberose to chrysanthemums. Even the unscented marigold flower, heaped in vast piles, lends an earthy freshness to the dawn air. Flower vendors open when the sun rises and sell at a frenetic pace so by 9am they're done for the day.

Rabaul, Papua New Guinea

Frangipani Festival

This peaceful community get-together celebrates PNG's independence as well as the rebirth of Rabaul after it was devastated by the volcanic eruptions of Mount Tavurvur and Mount Vulcan in 1994. Frangipani perfumes the streets of this town and was the first flower to appear through the ash in the wake of the disaster. Expect traditional music, floats, canoe races and intense fire dances.

London, England

Flower shows

Every May since 1913, the grounds of the Royal Hospital Chelsea are transformed by the RHS Chelsea Flower Show with floral artwork displays by renowned designers, florists and nurseries from around the globe. The RHS Hampton Court Palace Garden Festival, now the biggest event of its kind in the world, differs from Chelsea in that you can buy plants to take home.