



LIFESTYLE | TRAVEL

How to nail a hotel-hopping road trip through the South of France



Driving from Provence to Picasso's playground in St-Paul de Vence, *Katharine Sohn* takes in three of the South of France's chicest hotels

Synonymous with champagne-popping, yacht-bobbing, the see-and-be-seen crowd – the South of France is bumper to bumper in summer. The smart move for those who want to experience it without the throngs? Come in shoulder season – late October – when roads clear, restaurants open back up to locals, and the sun still happily shines.

I first holidayed in Provence six years ago, in the hazy hilltop town of Gordes – back before the crowds properly caught on. I fell wildly in love. With Provence, yes, but also this whole corner of the South: the old-school glamour of Ramatuelle, the creative edge just outside Nice, the food markets and dusty olive groves of the Luberon.

On my most recent visit I took a whistlestop road trip: flying into Marseille (a city that deserves its own standalone weekend), then on through vineyards, back down to the sea, and inland to where the artists once flocked, St-Paul de Vence. The perfect way to punctuate the trip? Three stays – each effortlessly stylish and pulling me in for a different reason. The rest was just the roads in between. Here's how to recreate it.

Day 5-7: an artist's retreat near Nice

I could have stayed salt-licked forever, but our road trip was set to turn inland next. The flight back home was from Nice, but first: a reservation for lunch at **La Colombe d'Or** – the fabled artist's haunt where Calder mobiles lay by the pool, Picassos hide inside, and the crayon-like-scrawled A-sized menus are part of the legend. It had been on my bucket list for years, so we had to go all out: we ordered buttery escargot, razor-thin Parma ham draped over fat wedges of sweet melon, aioli-dipped white fish, and finished with frothy macchiatos in the garden.

Read more: What to eat, drink and do in Nice

Down the hill lay our final stop: **Toile Blanche** in Saint-Paul de Vence. The Leroy Brothers – three siblings who are both artists and hoteliers – have turned this from a modest B&B into a 27-suite creative retreat.

Some rooms come with private plunge pools (perfect for a morning dip), but there's also a villa, three pools (the top one being our favourite), sprawling gardens, and an art gallery on-site, too.

Rooms are stocked with eco-friendly Les Choses Simples products, but more interestingly, they're set up as wellness spaces: in-room massages, al fresco yoga, and a tree planted per stay partnership with Hotels for Trees.

The food is rather excellent and in-the-know regulars book way in advance. Lunch might be grilled octopus, pan con tomate and sardines in oil at the more beachy and casual La Guinguette, while dinner might be sausage-stuffed vegetables, a rack of lamb or super-sized prawns, with views across the valley. The vibe is barefoot-luxe, with an eye on design.

And then there's the art. Rooms and communal spaces double as galleries, while Toile Blanche Contemporary showcases rotating exhibitions – sometimes by the brothers themselves, sometimes by their friends. It's less a hotel with art on the walls, more creative hub you happen to sleep in.

We returned back to the UK from here, golden-skinned, full of peaches and poolside spritzes.

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