



Castellane



Point Sublime

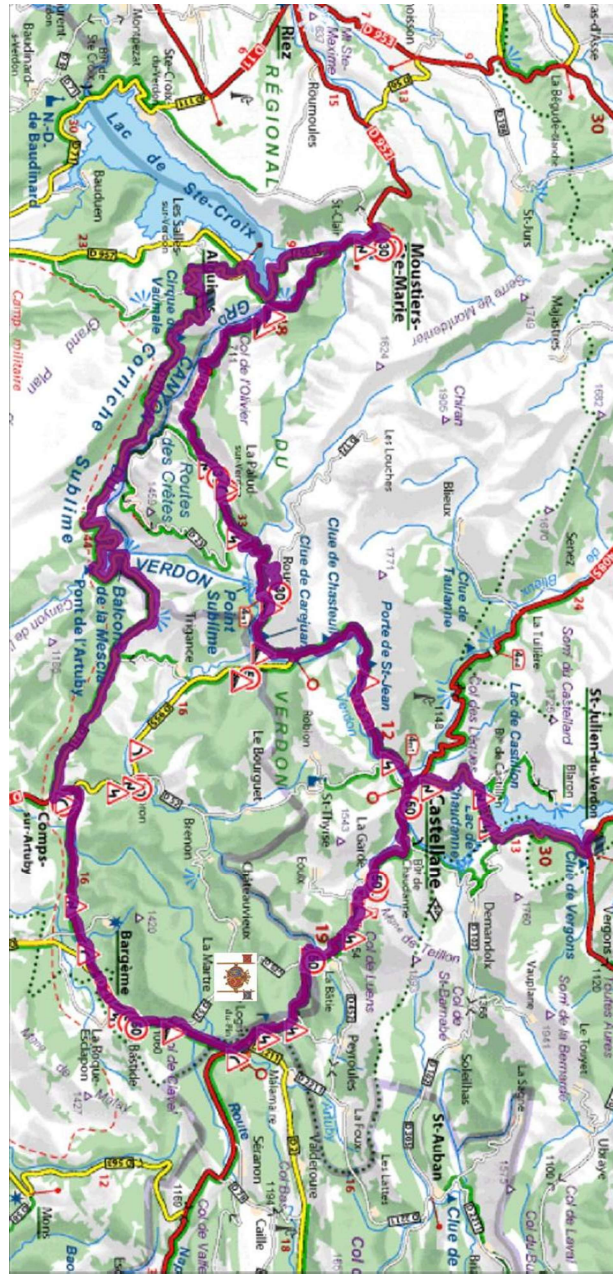


Route des Crêtes

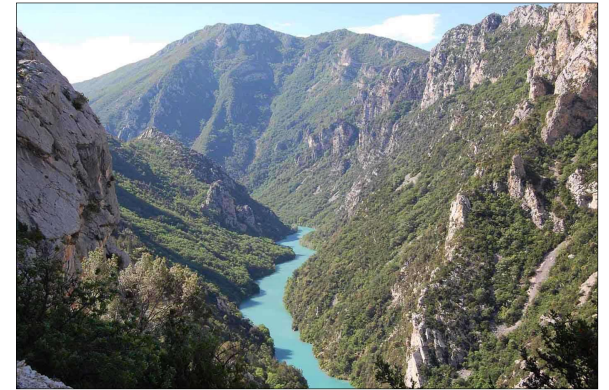


Moustiers Ste Marie

Itinerary



Les Gorges du Verdon



Road Trip in the Canyon of the Verdon

The drive around the fabulous Gorges du Verdon in the Regional Natural Park of the Verdon is not for the faint hearted. It's a journey with wonderful viewpoints and gaping crevices that plunge 700 meters deep. It's a drive of hairpin bends with the odd stopping place. Quite frankly, it's worth every nail-biting moment.

**At the gate of Taulane turn left –
20 minutes drive until Castellane**

The pleasant small town of **Castellane** is dominated by a 184 meter / 603 feet high rock on which a chapel, Notre Dame du Roc, perches. Castellane was once located up there before it moved down to its current, more accessible position. But you can still walk up to the chapel if you have the time and inclination.

There's a small old town and, on the main square, place Marcel Sauvaire, an information centre, the Maison Nature Patrimoines, with displays about the gorges and information as well as temporary exhibitions. Castellane itself also has a Tourist Office on the rue Nationale.

Other than a good farmers' market with high-quality Italian and mountain produce on Wednesday mornings (look for honey, sausage, nougat and cheeses) and a general market on Saturday mornings, there is not much more here to detain the visitor.

Out of Castellane, take the D952 to start the anti-clockwise circuit around the Gorges du Verdon along the north bank. The road, *pictured*, runs alongside the river, before climbing to **Point Sublime**, a celebrated viewing point on the route. The car park here can get very busy in summer (there's also a small snack bar) But a short walk will reward you with majestic views over the river 700 meters / 2,300 feet below and the *Couloir Samson* (Samson's Corridor). This signals the beginning of the gorges proper and owes its name to a segment of the rock formation which - supposedly - looks like an Atlas-like figure holding up the cliff.

Perched high above Point Sublime, the tiny, intimate village of **Rougon** (altitude 963 meters / 3,160 feet) is worth a quick visit if the traffic is not too heavy. Note, though, that the road to it is narrow with few places to pass and parking is inevitably limited at the top.

This little community has its own Town Hall, post office, village shop and tourist information point as well as a crêperie and restaurant. Rougon offers even more stunning views, and many of the best hikes through the Gorges of Verdon pass through, or start here. It is also a great vantage-point for bird watching.

The **Griffon Vulture**, or wild vulture (*Gyps fulvus*) had disappeared from Provence for over a century when a program was begun in 1999 to reintroduce the species. Twelve vultures were released then and now around 100 thrive in the rocks around Rougon.

There is a viewing point in the village and the best time to spot them is in the late morning, when the cliff where they nest warms up in the sun. In summer it's possible to take a two-hour tour with an ornithologist.

Back on the D952, you will find the D23, or **route des Crêtes**, winding off to the left around 800 meters / half a mile before you arrive at La Palud sur Verdon (by the way, "route des Crêtes" is a generic term meaning "road across the crests"). It leads up to a pass 1,285 meters / 4,200 feet above sea level and 715 meters / 2,346 feet above the level of the river bed with 14 belvederes along the way where you can pull over to admire one of the amazing vistas, *pictured*. Allow at least an hour to drive it. The descent takes you through two tunnels and along hairpin bends with a deep drop to your left (and no barriers). The section from the top is one-way for around 15 km / 9 miles as far as the **Chalet de la Maline**. At this point is a building which was - being converted into a Centre Regional de Montagne (Regional Mountain Centre). The route des Crêtes rejoins the main route des Gorges at **La Palud sur Verdon** 23 km / 14 miles later. Note that you cannot complete the route des Crêtes starting from La Palud, since the one-way strip is in the opposite direction.



From here the road snakes down through towering rock formations towards **Moustiers Sainte Marie**, which is certainly worth a detour if you have time. If you want to complete the circuit round the Gorges du Verdon along the south bank of the river, turn left along the D957 about 2 km / 1.2 miles before arriving in Moustiers. This road skirts the **Lac de Sainte Croix** (Sainte Croix Lake), *pictured*, through which the Verdon river runs. The largest reservoir in France, this huge, 10 km / 6 mile long 2,200 hectare / 5,436 acre expanse of bright turquoise water is an artificial lake created by a dam in 1974 to improve Provence's water supply. A bus, the "Estelline", shuttles to the Lac de Sainte Croix from Moustiers, in summer only.

You might make a detour to visit the lakeside town of **Les Salles sur Verdon**, built to replace the original village which was forcibly razed and flooded in 1974 to make way for the lake. It caused much anger among local families, many of whom felt poorly compensated for losing homes where they had lived for centuries. The new version of Les Salles is a strange, rather soulless affair with an enormous, out-of-proportion church and a large number of tourist bars that are pleasant spots in summer but must be ghostly in winter.

Out of Les Salles take the D71, then the D19 through **Aiguines**, an attractive hillside village with sweeping views over the lake, colorful houses, a 17th century church and chateau and a reputation for artefacts turned from local box wood and its boules de pétanque made of box tree roots.

The route de la Corniche Sublime then takes you along the south side of the Gorges du Verdon along densely wooded slopes. Watch out for the goats! You pass the cliff known as the **Falaise des Cavaliers**, which is the starting point for a popular hiking path, the Sentier de l'Imbut and the **Tunnel du Fayet**, then cross the **Pont de l'Artuby** (182 metres / 597 feet), a favoured spot for bungee jumping. A narrow side road to the left, the D90, leads off to **Trigance**, a quiet mediaeval hillside village with an interesting little local history museum and a couple of bars. The route will take you back to Comps, La Bastide, and then Château de Taulane.