

Changing Gears

ADVENTURES
ABOUND ON THE
CYCLING TRAILS
IN PROVENCE



WORDS BY
SUZANNE MORPHET

PHOTOGRAPHY BY
GUILLAUME MEGEVAND



GRIPPING MY HANDLEBARS,

I fly down the narrow country road, leaning into each bend as it comes, the roar of the wind in my ears. Adrenaline fires my imagination. I'm no longer a middle-aged woman from Victoria, B.C., on her first cycling trip abroad. No, I'm Ryder Hesjedal and I'm racing in the Tour de France, careening down the lower slopes of Mont Ventoux, the mighty mountain of Provence. The landscape and my speedometer confirm it: vineyards whiz by in a blur as I clock 48 kilometres an hour.

My reverie ends with the next incline, but that's OK. I don't need to be my hometown hero—or even in his league—to enjoy cycling in Provence, with its dreamy landscapes, perched villages and farmers' markets. (Though it doesn't hurt to have the appetite of a professional cyclist in a region that's known for the good life.)

My friend Joan and I have opted for a self-guided tour on half a dozen routes to give us a taste of different areas of Provence. Before leaving Canada, we downloaded maps showing distances, gradients and sights to see along the way. Our hybrid bikes are ordered

(with electric assist for the more challenging days) and our hotels are booked. We're good to go. Still, we're nervous. Joan and I both enjoy cycling, but neither of us has spent more than a few hours in a bike saddle at a stretch. Are we fit enough for five days of cycling? Can we get by with our high school French? And what if we get lost?

Our first day, we set out on a 42-kilometre loop from the old Roman town of Vaison-la-Romaine, about 50 kilometres northeast of Avignon. The sky is gunmetal grey and clouds are spitting when we leave Hôtel Burrhus. But the rain can't diminish the landscape or our enthusiasm—we're in Provence!

In mid-October, the vineyards here are as colourful as the maple forests at home. Plane trees conspire to create leafy tunnels to catch the rain. Villages are small and charming, with cobblestone streets, church steeples and gurgling fountains. Séguret, enclosed within medieval walls, is particularly picturesque. We stop to refuel with coffee and cake, and admire the work of local artisans, which includes *santons*—the adorable hand-painted terracotta figurines used in nativity scenes at Christmas.

By early afternoon, after cycling about 20 kilometres, we're wet and hungry and seek shelter at Auberge Castel Mireïo, a former winemaker's home near the hilltop village of Cairanne. We must look like two drowned rats, but the owners are warm and welcoming, greeting us with glasses of sparkling wine and grapefruit juice, and letting us hang our clothes to dry.





SLICE OF LIFE
 Clockwise, from left:
 Thierry Delasalles,
 a winemaker and olive-oil producer
 in Bédoin; *pains au
 chocolat* from the
 market in Bédoin;
 a waitress taking a
 break at La Maison
 d'Eglantine in
 Séguret; biking along
 the idyllic streets of
 Esperron-de-Verdon;
 the menu posted
 at La Maison
 d'Eglantine in
 Séguret, which offers
cake du cycliste
 (cyclist's cake)



UR LUCK IMPROVES, THOUGH;
 the weather gets better with each day and
 soon we're cycling under blue skies on
 quiet country roads, past groves of olive
 trees and fields of lavender. At the Monday
 market in Bédoin, we weave our bikes
 through the crowded street, stopping to
 buy lavender soap and inhale the scent of
 the seed that's sold loose from big burlap
 bags. We continue on the 23-kilometre
 Gateway to Mont Ventoux loop.

After two hilly days, the former railway
 track between Coustellet and Apt is a
 welcome flat stretch. It's a school holiday
 and we meet numerous families cycling
 leisurely with young children, sometimes
 three generations together. The Véloroute
 du Calavon is also part of the EuroVelo 8:
 the almost 6,000-kilometre Mediterranean
 cycling route that directly links France ▷

with Italy and Spain. We stop for a picnic lunch on the Pont Julien, an old Roman bridge, where we devour crusty baguettes, aromatic goat cheese, sweet blue Muscat grapes and salty black and green olives.

Every day the scenery is delightful, but it's the food that sustains us. Three dishes I won't soon forget are the rich and creamy panna cotta topped with



puréed beet at the Hôtel des Pins; an appetizer of paper-thin beef carpaccio topped with shaved parmesan cheese and dollops of pesto at Hôtel le Mas des Grès; and fresh goat cheese drizzled with lavender honey at La Colombière du Château.

Each night, sated and tired (but thankfully never sore, even after five or six hours in the saddle), we're in bed by 10 p.m. Countless



châteaux and mansions dot the countryside, often the former estates of wealthy landowners, now converted to boutique hotels. Just outside Forcalquier, at the end of our longest cycling day—60 kilometres over seven hours—we arrive at a stone mansion that was once a monastery. Artistic references to cycling adorn the walls and fill the nooks of Hôtel Charembreau. “We’ve always been bike nuts, my father and I,” Martin Berger explains, adding that with the creation of signposted routes “more and more cyclists are coming.”

For Berger, cycling is “kind of a retreat, an escape.” But for us, it’s the opposite—a headfirst plunge into Provence, every day filled with new adventures: exploring the former ochre mine that’s tunnelled into the orange and yellow cliffs near Gargas; meeting a 94-year-old priest in Mormoiron who bursts into singing “God Save the Queen” when he learns we’re Canadian; seeing a wild boar outside our hotel.

We have misadventures too: the time Joan and I get separated after losing sight of each other cycling ▷



LOCAL RETREAT
Opposite page: A goat-cheese farm owned by mother-daughter duo Amalia and Nathalie Fariello in L’Hospitalet. This page, clockwise, from top: a villager plays pétanque in Banon; the Fariello farm in L’Hospitalet produces a variety of goat cheese; taking in the view of the village of Lagnes



AFTER CYCLING OVER FIVE DAYS, WE'RE IN LOVE WITH PROVENCE: THE PEOPLE, THE FOOD, THE LANDSCAPES

GO FOR A RIDE

Make cycling part of your next vacation! If you're heading to Provence, or looking for exciting destination ideas, CAA has researched the best cycling routes for every experience level. CAA can also help with accommodations and bike rentals, as well as suggest attractions and events happening along your way.

 **LEARN MORE** 

Visit a CAA Store, call 1-800-268-3750 or go to caasco.com/provence

WWW | Read about five more bike trails worth exploring at caamagazine.ca



IF YOU GO

Provence Cycling and Vélo Loisir Provence both promote recreational cycling. Their wide network of members—hotels, bed and breakfasts, restaurants, bike-rental companies, taxis and more—caters to cyclists. Member hotels and B&Bs offer cyclists a hearty breakfast, secure storage for their bikes and a place to wash and dry laundry. Member taxis are equipped to carry bicycles and transfer luggage.

For information on the Vaucluse area of Provence, see provence-cycling.com. For information on the Luberon and Verdon areas, see veloloisirprovence.com/en.



through a village with several twists and turns (we reconnect an hour later with the help of two German cyclists who pass on a message from me to her); the seven-hour cycling day when we exhaust the batteries on our electric bikes.

Our own resourcefulness—and that of the locals—amazes us. Our lack of French is never a problem, and with e-bikes giving us a boost, fitness level is not a barrier—almost anyone could do this.



OUR LAST DAY IS THE BEST YET—

or maybe it just feels that way because our trip is coming to an end. Leaving Gréoux-les-Bains, we pedal a winding road through the Verdon Regional Nature Park, above Lac d'Esparron. Belled sheep graze noisily in a field under the watchful eye of guard dogs. In the lakeside village of Esparron de Verdon, we stop to watch villagers play the ancestral game of *pétanque*.

That night we sleep deeply in a 17th-century farmhouse where an enormous stone olive mill rests, idle since 1957 when a hard frost killed three million olive trees, according to Nicolas Staempfli-Faoro, who owns Le Moulin du Château with his wife, Edith. Soon afterward, olive oil went temporarily out of fashion. “The modern, American-style way of life was becoming fashionable in Europe at the time and people started to prefer things like peanut oil and light margarine as a cooking base,” Staempfli-Faoro says over breakfast, shrugging his shoulders.

Some things are simply inexplicable. But our *joie de vivre* is not. After cycling roughly

185 kilometres over five days, we’re in love with Provence: the people, the food, the landscapes. The only pain we experience—if you could call it that—is an ache to return. **CAA**

SWEET TREATS
Clockwise, from top: Breakfast at Le Mas de Grès in Lagnes Cus; at the Monday market in Bédoin, where merchants sell lavender by the bundle; a local man shops for bread at the market in Bédoin