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Hidden France

25 Places Only Locals Know

France has 36,000 communes — and the world knows fewer than a hundred of them. These are the others. The hidden valleys, the clifftop villages, the forgotten canyons, the places the locals guard with the same fierce affection they guard their recipes.

A Gift for Our Subscribers

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01

CORRÈZE, NOUVELLE-AQUITAINE

Collonges-la-Rouge — The Village of Red Stone

An Entire Village Built from Blood-Red Sandstone

Hidden in the Corrèze valley near the Dordogne border, Collonges-la-Rouge is unlike any other village in France — every single building, from the church to the humblest cottage, is constructed from the same vivid crimson sandstone that glows deep red in afternoon light. One of the founding members of Les Plus Beaux Villages de France, yet still largely undiscovered by the tourist masses who flock to Dordogne's limestone towns. The village dates to the 8th century and retains its medieval watchtowers, Romanesque church tympanum, and vine-covered lanes almost entirely intact. When the evening light catches the stone, the whole village appears to be on fire.

**LOCAL
TIP:**

Come in late afternoon when the red stone is at its most intense. The Sunday morning market (in season) draws locals, not tourists.

02

LOT, OCCITANIE

Saint-Cirq-Lapopie — City Above the River

The Village That Inspired André Breton to Abandon Paris

Perched on a sheer 100-metre cliff above the emerald Lot river, Saint-Cirq-Lapopie so bewitched Surrealist poet André Breton that he sold his Paris apartment and moved here permanently. The medieval village — a cluster of timbered houses, sculpted stone facades, and a Romanesque church — clings to the cliff edge as if planted by hand. The valley stretching in both directions is one of the most beautiful river panoramas in France. The village has repelled tourists not through obscurity but through its almost violent beauty — people arrive and struggle to describe what they've seen. Voted France's favourite village in a 2012 national poll, yet most foreigners have never heard the name.

**LOCAL
TIP:**

Stay overnight — the daytime coach tours leave by 17:00 and the village becomes yours. The path down to the river at dawn is extraordinary.

03

AVEYRON, OCCITANIE

Conques — The Golden Pilgrimage

A Medieval Abbey with the Greatest Tympanum in Christendom

Deep in the Aveyron gorge, the pilgrimage village of Conques sits where two rivers meet in a valley so hidden that even the Romans missed it. The Abbaye de Sainte-Foy, built between the 9th and 12th centuries, is considered one of the masterworks of Romanesque architecture in France — and its tympanum above the west doorway, depicting the Last Judgement in minute carved detail, is arguably the finest in the world. The abbey treasury holds one of the richest collections of Carolingian and Romanesque religious objects in existence. Step-artist Pierre Soulages designed the 104 modern stained-glass windows that flood the nave with extraordinary light. The Chemin de Saint-Jacques passes through Conques — most pilgrims arrive exhausted and leave transformed.

**LOCAL
TIP:**

The treasury is not to be missed — the Reliquary of Sainte-Foy (9th century, jewelled gold) is priceless. Arrive early: afternoon crowds are heavier.

04

DORDOGNE, NOUVELLE-AQUITAINE

La Roque-Gageac — Golden Cliffs on the Dordogne

A Village Wedged Between Rock Face and River

Along the Dordogne river east of Sarlat, the village of La Roque-Gageac is built directly into the base of a towering limestone cliff, the warm golden stone of the houses barely distinguishable from the rock itself. The cliff traps heat so effectively that exotic plants — banana trees, mimosa, palms — thrive here in a micro-climate that feels more Mediterranean than Périgord. Traditional flat-bottomed gabarres boats still navigate the river below. From a canoe on the Dordogne, the view back to the village — pale gold, vertical, ancient — is one of those visions that stops you mid-paddle, unable to quite believe what you are seeing.

**LOCAL
TIP:**

Rent a canoe in Beynac or Vitrac and paddle to La Roque-Gageac — the river view is infinitely better than the road view. The troglodyte fort above is barely visited.

05

TARN, OCCITANIE

Cordes-sur-Ciel — City in the Clouds

The Cathar Hilltop Town That Appears to Float Above the Plain

Founded in 1222 by Count Raymond VII of Toulouse in the aftermath of the Cathar Crusade, Cordes-sur-Ciel — Cordes-in-the-Sky — rises on a solitary sandstone peak above the Cérou valley, its Gothic houses and medieval ramparts disappearing into the cloud on winter mornings. The town became a haven for artists and craftspeople in the 20th century and retains an atmospheric artistic community alongside its perfectly preserved Rayonnant Gothic architecture. The four sets of medieval gates, the Gothic covered market, and the carved stone facades of the Grand Rue are outstanding. On misty mornings, when cloud fills the valley and only the church tower pierces above it, the town genuinely appears to levitate.

**LOCAL
TIP:**

Come in October or early November — the summer festival crowds are gone, the light is golden, and the cloud inversions are most common.

06

ALPES-DE-HAUTE-PROVENCE, PROVENCE

Entrevaux — The Forgotten Citadel

A Walled Fortress Town Untouched Since Vauban Designed It

On the border of what was once Savoy and France, the fortified town of Entrevaux stands almost exactly as Vauban designed it in 1693 — its drawbridge, cathedral, ramparts, and spectacular zigzagging citadel path seemingly frozen in time. The Var river curves around three sides, and the train from Nice-to-Digne passes directly through — making it accessible yet utterly uncrowded. Most passengers look out the window in astonishment and immediately plan to return. The Chemin de la Citadelle climbs 160 metres via 20 rampart sections to a fortress with views over the Alpine foothills that are simply extraordinary. One bakery, two restaurants, and silence.

**LOCAL
TIP:**

Take the Chemins de Fer de Provence train from Nice — the journey through the Var gorge is itself a spectacle. The citadel path takes 30 minutes up, worth every step.

07

AIN, AUVERGNE-RHÔNE-ALPES

Pérouges — The Medieval City Near Lyon

A Perfectly Preserved Medieval Village 35 Minutes from a Major City

Thirty-five kilometres northeast of Lyon, on a hilltop above the Ain plain, Pérouges is a medieval walled village so extraordinarily preserved that it has been used as a film set for dozens of historical productions. The cobblestone lanes, 15th-century timber-framed houses, and intact ramparts look exactly as they did five centuries ago. The village was saved from demolition in 1909 by a committee of artists who recognised what was about to be lost — and everything from the paving to the well in the main square has been carefully maintained ever since. The galette de Pérouges — a thin, buttery, sugar-dusted tart baked in the village — is one of the finest things to eat in all of France.

**LOCAL
TIP:**

The galette de Pérouges from the Hostellerie du Vieux-Pérouges is not optional — order it. Visit on a weekday to have the village mostly to yourself.

08

ARDÈCHE, AUVERGNE-RHÔNE-ALPES

Balazuc — Volcanic Stone on the Ardèche

One of France's Most Beautiful Villages, Still Largely Undiscovered

On the banks of the Ardèche river, the village of Balazuc climbs a volcanic basalt cliff in a tangle of stepped lanes, arched passageways, and honey-coloured stone towers that glow amber at sunset. The church dates to the 11th century; the houses cascade down the rock face in layers, connected by tunnels and covered alleyways that feel more North African than French. Below, the Ardèche runs clear and cold over limestone slabs where locals swim in summer. In a region famous for spectacular gorges and prehistoric art, Balazuc remains the hidden jewel — known to artists and architects, barely mentioned in mainstream guides.

**LOCAL
TIP:**

Park in the lower car park and walk up through the village — the views back down to the river from the church are the reward. Early morning light is magical.

Aiguèze — The Clifftop Village Above the Ardèche

A Medieval Village at the Edge of the Ardèche Canyon

At the confluence of the Ardèche and Rhône rivers, the village of Aiguèze stands on the limestone clifftop directly above the Ardèche gorges, its medieval tower and church silhouetted against the sky. From the clifftop rampart walk, the gorge below — the Grand Canyon of France — drops sheer for 300 metres into turquoise water. The village itself is a pure medieval ensemble: stone lanes, flowering window boxes, and an 11th-century château. The Ardèche gorge canoe trip ends just below the village walls — paddlers emerge from the gorge and look up to find a medieval fortress watching from the cliff. Almost no one stops here. It is extraordinary.

**LOCAL
TIP:**

Combine Aiguèze with the Ardèche gorge canoe trip — paddle from Vallon-Pont-d'Arc to Saint-Martin (2 days) and finish beneath Aiguèze's walls.

10

HÉRAULT, OCCITANIE

Saint-Guilhem-le-Désert — The Abbey in the Gorge

A Carolingian Abbey Hidden in a Fold of the Hérault Gorge

At the end of a winding drive through the Hérault gorge, the ancient village of Saint-Guilhem-le-Désert appears as if assembled from the gorge walls themselves — pale limestone buildings clustered around a Carolingian abbey founded in 804 AD. The Abbey of Gellone was built by Guilhem, a military commander and cousin of Charlemagne, who retired here after a lifetime of war and became a saint. The Romanesque cloister columns now stand in the Cloisters Museum in New York — what remains in situ is still beautiful. The village square, shaded by a vast plane tree over 300 years old, is one of the most perfect spaces in France. The Chemin de Saint-Jacques passes through here — pilgrims have been stopping for 1,200 years.

**LOCAL
TIP:**

Swim in the Hérault river just outside the village — the turquoise limestone pools below the gorge are clean, beautiful, and rarely crowded before July.

11

ARIÈGE, OCCITANIE

Mirepoix — The Medieval Market Town

The Finest Medieval Timber-Framed Main Square in France

In the Ariège foothills of the Pyrenees, the bastide town of Mirepoix contains what is widely considered the finest example of a medieval covered market square in France. The place principale is entirely surrounded by 14th-century wooden arcades — each one unique, carved with faces, animals, and scenes from medieval life — supporting timber-framed upper storeys that overhang the arcades in the distinctive style of this corner of Languedoc. The Monday market fills the square entirely and operates exactly as it has for seven centuries. The nearby Cathar castles of Montségur, Puivert, and Roquefixade are all within 30 minutes' drive. Most visitors to Cathar country miss Mirepoix entirely.

**LOCAL
TIP:**

The Monday market is the best in the Ariège — produce, cheese, textiles, and antiques fill every arcade. Arrive by 8:00 AM for the best selection.

12

VAUCLUSE, PROVENCE

Gordes — The Luberon's Finest Hilltop Village

A Perched Village That Looks as if Sculpted from the Mountaintop

Rising from a bare white limestone ridge above the Luberon plain, Gordes is the quintessential Provençal perched village — a mass of pale stone houses ascending to a Renaissance château that anchors the summit. Nearby, the Abbaye de Sénanque sits in a valley ringed by lavender fields in July, its Romanesque towers framed by purple rows in one of the most-photographed views in Provence. Yet beyond the famous view, the village rewards wanderers: the Borie Village (a prehistoric dry-stone settlement of corbelled huts hidden in the garrigue below the village) is one of the most atmospheric sites in southern France, and almost no one walks the 20 minutes out of town to find it.

**LOCAL
TIP:**

The Borie Village is 2km south — walk, don't drive. The dry-stone beehive huts date to the Bronze Age and feel completely otherworldly. Most tourists never leave the car park.

13

CAMARGUE, PROVENCE

Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer — Flamingos and Gypsy Saints

The Roma Pilgrimage Town Where Flamingos Outnumber Tourists

At the southern tip of the Camargue delta, where the Rhône finally dissolves into the Mediterranean, the town of Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer is unlike anywhere else in France. It is first a Roma pilgrimage site — the crypt of its fortified Romanesque church contains the relics of Sara-la-Kali, patron saint of the Romani people, and every May thousands of Roma make the journey here from across Europe. It is second a wild-nature gateway: white horses, black bulls, and flamingos fill the marshes directly behind the town. Drive the D37 south in the evening and you will encounter vast flamingo flocks crossing the road at sunset. Nothing in the rest of France prepares you for it.

**LOCAL
TIP:**

The Parc Ornithologique de Pont-de-Gau (3km north) is the best flamingo watching spot in Europe. September and October see enormous migrating flocks.

Blesle — The Hidden Auvergne Jewel

A Medieval Village in a Volcanic Valley Almost No One Has Found

In a deep gorge of the Rhue river in the Haute-Loire département of the Auvergne, the village of Blesle is one of the best-kept secrets in central France. Founded around a Benedictine abbey in the 9th century, the village retains its medieval towers, arcaded market hall, and dark Romanesque church in a state of almost accidental preservation. The surrounding plateau — the Planèze — is dramatic volcanic upland, ancient lava flows softened into rolling green hills dotted with black cattle. The village has perhaps one café open in summer and no queues for anything. To stand in the square at midday and hear nothing but birdsong in a village this beautiful is a privilege that disappears as tourist infrastructure catches up.

**LOCAL
TIP:**

Combine with nearby Brioude (Romanesque basilica) and the Gorges de l'Allagnon for a full day in volcanic Auvergne rarely seen by foreign visitors.

Lavardin — The Loire's Forgotten Castle

The Finest Ruined Castle in the Loire — and the Least Visited

On the banks of the Loir (not Loire) river, the medieval village of Lavardin shelters beneath the ruins of what Henry II of England considered the strongest castle in France. The keep — shattered by Richelieu's demolition order in the 17th century — still rises 24 metres, and the view from the top across the Loir valley is spectacular. The village church contains 12th-century frescoes in extraordinary condition, depicting the life of John the Baptist in bold Romanesque colour. The village itself — a few lanes of tuffeau stone houses with flowering gardens — is perfect. Everyone who comes to the Loire goes to Chambord. Almost no one drives 40 minutes north to Lavardin, which is a genuine traveller's secret.

**LOCAL
TIP:**

The Loir valley between Vendôme and La Flèche is full of troglodyte cave dwellings, ancient abbeys, and wine cellars — ideal for a day of exploration away from château crowds.

16

FINISTÈRE, BRITTANY

Locronan — The Breton Village Frozen in the 16th Century

A Medieval Breton Village So Perfect That Film Directors Seek It Out

In the hills above the Bay of Douarnenez in western Brittany, the village of Locronan exists in a state of architectural perfection so complete that it has been used as a film set by Roman Polanski (*Tess*) and numerous French productions requiring an authentic medieval setting. The granite main square, its 15th-century church, and the surrounding Renaissance houses have changed almost not at all since the town's prosperous sailcloth industry collapsed in the 18th century — poverty being the greatest preserver of architectural heritage. The surrounding forest and moor is the setting for the *Troménie* — an ancient Breton religious procession held every six years that follows a pre-Christian sacred path around the mountain. The next *Grande Troménie* is in 2031.

**LOCAL
TIP:**

Come on a weekday in May, June, or September — the summer coach tours are heavy in July and August. The surrounding forest walks are beautiful in any weather.

Eus — The Sunniest Village in France

A Hilltop Catalan Village That Receives More Sunshine Than Anywhere in France

On a rocky spur above the Têt river in Catalan France, the village of Eus is officially recorded as receiving more hours of sunshine per year than any other commune in France — more than Cannes, more than Nice, more than anywhere on the Côte d'Azur. The village is a labyrinth of Catalan stone lanes climbing to a Baroque church at the summit, its yellow stone soaking up the abundant light. The valley below — the fertile Conflent — is planted with peach and apple orchards. To the west, the Canigou massif (the sacred mountain of the Catalans) closes the horizon. The village is small and quiet and utterly overlooked by the millions who visit the nearby Romanesque Abbey of Saint-Michel-de-Cuxa each year.

**LOCAL
TIP:**

Combine with the Abbey of Saint-Michel-de-Cuxa (4km) and the town of Prades (home to the legendary Casals music festival each August) for a perfect Catalan day.

Les Baux-de-Provence — The Fortress at the Edge of the Sky

A Ruined Citadel on the Alpilles Ridge With Views to the Sea

At the southern tip of the Alpilles limestone ridge, the citadel of Les Baux-de-Provence occupies a rocky spur so dramatic that the Lords of Baux declared themselves descendants of Balthazar, one of the Magi. The ruins of the château, destroyed by Louis XIII in 1632 as punishment for Protestant rebellion, still command one of the greatest views in Provence — on clear days the Camargue and the sea are visible to the south; the Rhône valley stretches north. Below the ruins, the living village is almost perfectly preserved Renaissance: carved stone facades, artisan workshops, and the extraordinary Carrières de Lumières (an immersive art projection in the former quarry caves that is genuinely breathtaking). The tourist guides know Les Baux, but the hilltop ruins at night, when day visitors have left, are otherworldly.

**LOCAL
TIP:**

The Carrières de Lumières changes its exhibition annually — check what's showing before visiting. The ruins are free to walk and best seen at sunset.

Bonneval-sur-Arc — The Unspoiled Alpine Village

The Highest, Most Isolated, and Most Beautiful Village in the French Alps

At 1,800 metres in the Haute-Maurienne valley below the Col de l'Iseran — the highest paved pass in the Alps — Bonneval-sur-Arc is the most perfectly preserved traditional alpine village in France. The commune forbids all modern building materials: every house is constructed from local grey schist with traditional wooden roofs, exactly as the village has appeared for 400 years. In winter, heavy snowfall cuts the highest parts of the valley; in summer, the surrounding Parc National de la Vanoise offers some of the finest mountain walking in the Alps, with ibex, chamois, and golden eagles visible on clear days above the treeline. The nearest lift-served ski resort is several valleys away. Bonneval remains beautifully, deliberately itself.

**LOCAL
TIP:**

The Col de l'Iseran road (open June–October, weather permitting) continues from Bonneval to Val-d'Isère — one of the great mountain drives of the Alps. Allow a full day.

Cascade du Hérisson — The Waterfall Gorge

The Most Beautiful Waterfall Trail in France, Still a Local Secret

In the Jura mountains south of Lons-le-Saunier, the Hérisson river cascades through a spectacular series of 31 waterfalls over a 4-kilometre gorge walk that rivals anything in the Alps for beauty. The route passes beneath the Grand Saut (65 metres), the Éventail (60 metres), the Moulin Jeunet, and the Gour Bleu — each fall more dramatic than the last, the path climbing through mossy limestone canyon walls draped with ferns. The Jura is one of France's least-visited regions by foreign tourists, who instead converge on the Dordogne and Provence, leaving this extraordinary landscape largely to French weekenders. The Comté cheese dairies, yellow wine vineyards, and glacial lakes of the surrounding region make it one of France's great undiscovered touring circuits.

**LOCAL
TIP:**

Start at Doucier and walk upstream (hardest first, best rewarded). Spring snowmelt makes the falls most dramatic in April–May. Bring waterproof shoes — the path gets wet.

YONNE, BOURGOGNE-FRANCHE-COMTÉ

Noyers-sur-Serein — The Hidden Burgundy Village

A Perfectly Intact Medieval Bastide in the Heart of Burgundy Wine Country

An hour's drive southeast of Auxerre in northern Burgundy, the small town of Noyers-sur-Serein sits within an almost complete circuit of 13th-century ramparts and 23 medieval towers, the Serein river looping around three sides. Inside the walls, cobblestone lanes wind between timbered houses with carved stone pillars, a 15th-century Gothic church, and a medieval market square that hasn't changed in principle since the town was founded in 1208. The surrounding countryside is some of the quietest in Burgundy — rolling chalk hills, limestone valleys, and small producers making Chablis and Irancy wines that rarely leave the region. Noyers appears in no major guidebooks. Its locals plan to keep it that way.

**LOCAL
TIP:**

The Musée de Noyers (naïve art) in the old salt barn is surprisingly excellent. The market on Tuesday mornings is local and genuine. Try the local Époisses cheese — the best is made within 20km.

Piana — The Pink Granite Calanques

A Village Above the Most Dramatic Coastline in the Mediterranean

On the west coast of Corsica, the village of Piana overlooks the Calanques de Piana — a UNESCO World Heritage Site of extraordinary pink and red granite outcrops that plunge 400 metres into the Gulf of Porto. The rocks, sculpted by wind and water into shapes of impossible fantasy — towers, arches, organ pipes, faces — glow scarlet at sunset in a spectacle unlike anything else in Europe. The village itself is small and Corsican to its core: a few stone houses, a church, a restaurant, maquis-covered hillsides, and the smell of rosemary and wild thyme. The boat trip from Porto through the calanques is essential. The D81 coast road is one of the most spectacular drives in France — or anywhere.

**LOCAL
TIP:**

The boat trip from Porto into the calanques (2 hours) is far superior to the road viewpoints — the scale of the granite is only apparent from the water. Book ahead in August.

Gorges de la Jonte — Where the Vultures Returned

A Hidden Gorge Where Griffon Vultures Were Reintroduced After a Century

Between Millau and Meyrueis, the Gorges de la Jonte cuts through the limestone plateaux of the Causse Méjean and the Causse Noir — narrower and wilder than its famous neighbour the Gorges du Tarn, and almost entirely visitor-free by comparison. The gorge was chosen in 1981 as the reintroduction site for griffon vultures, extinct in France for over a century. Today, some 600 individuals soar on thermals above the limestone cliffs year-round — their 2.5-metre wingspans silhouetted against the sky with a slowness that makes time feel different here. The Belvédère des Vautours at La Rozier has telescopes trained on the nesting cliffs. To see a vulture this close, soaring at eye level in absolute silence, is one of the great wildlife experiences of France.

**LOCAL
TIP:**

Morning is the best time for vultures — they ride thermals as the sun warms the rock faces, typically from 9am. Bring binoculars. The D996 road through the gorge is stunning.

Gorges du Verdon — The Grand Canyon of Europe

A 25-Kilometre Canyon of Turquoise Water, Still Barely on the Map

Cut by the Verdon river through the limestone plateaux of upper Provence, the Gorges du Verdon is the deepest canyon in Europe — its walls dropping 700 metres to a river that runs an almost impossible shade of turquoise from the glacial melt and limestone suspension in the water. The Route des Crêtes along the south rim offers successive viewpoints of terrifying beauty; the Sentier Martel trail drops into the gorge itself and follows the river for 15 kilometres through galleries and along cliff-edges that make the most experienced walker's breath catch. The villages along the rim — Moustiers-Sainte-Marie, La Palud-sur-Verdon, Aiguines — are classic Provençal. The Lac de Sainte-Croix at the canyon's western mouth is an inland sea of the same impossible turquoise.

**LOCAL
TIP:**

Kayak the Verdon from Lac de Sainte-Croix into the mouth of the canyon — the first 3km are paddleable without a guide and the views are staggering. Book paddle hire at Bauduen.

Spelunca Gorge — The Road Into the Mountain Heart

A Granite Gorge Trail Used Since the Genoese Built Their Bridges

In the mountains above Porto on Corsica's northwest coast, the Spelunca Gorge cuts deep into the granite massif between the villages of Évisa and Ota, its walls rising 400 metres above the Aïtone river. A Genoese mule trail still connects the two villages — 3 hours of walking through chestnut forest, maquis, and granite canyon, crossing two ancient Genoese bridges at Zaglia and Pianella that have stood for 500 years. The trail sees a fraction of the visitors that the coastal road attracts, and the granite canyon in the final section — orange-red walls plunging to a river pool of impossible clarity — is one of the most beautiful things in all of Corsica. Which is saying something.

**LOCAL
TIP:**

Walk from Ota to Évisa (uphill but more rewarding at the end). Swim at the Genoese bridge pool at Zaglia — the water is cold, clear, and perfect. Book a room in Évisa and walk back next morning.

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