

France: Road trip »

Take the slow road

For nostalgia and charm, France's Route Nationale 7 beats the autoroute hands down writes Joel Porter



Drive through the French countryside on the RN7; below, markers for the RN7; boutique hotel Pantoufle, in the heart of the hilltop village of Marsanne; a patisserie in Aix-en-Provence. Photos / Unsplash, supplied

France's Route Nationale 7 may not be well known beyond its borders, but within France, it once held a cultural status akin to Route 66. Running from Paris to Menton, on the border with Italy, this historic road was the main route for those heading to the sunny Mediterranean coast during summer holidays, hence its nickname, the Route de Vacances.

In its heyday in the 50s and 60s, it was a journey familiar to thousands of French families, famous for the roadside eateries, scenery, and inevitable traffic jams. Such was its cultural impact, the road was even immortalised in a song, *Route Nationale 7* by Charles Trenet, with its refrain "we're all happy on Nationale 7!".

Much like Route 66, a network of speedy highways eventually rendered the RN7 redundant for long-distance travel in the 1970s. Yet, for those who believe it's about the journey, not just the destination, this old route offers a leisurely adventure through France's best scenery, villages and wine regions before arriving at the Cote d'Azur.

It's not all romance of course. Be warned, you'll almost certainly get stuck behind a slow-moving tractor. You will pass through dreary industrial estates and go around an endless succession of roundabouts. But even at its most prosaic, there is joy to be had in quietly plodding along a narrow road rather than hurtling at 130km/h on a three-lane highway.

Compleatists may want to start the journey in Paris, but we elected to do only the southern half,



beginning in Lyon and ending near Nice. Lyon is an underrated city with a mixed reputation, but we found it relaxed and charming in most parts and a real treat for food lovers — the city is home to legendary restaurants such as La Mère Brazier and Paul Bocuse.

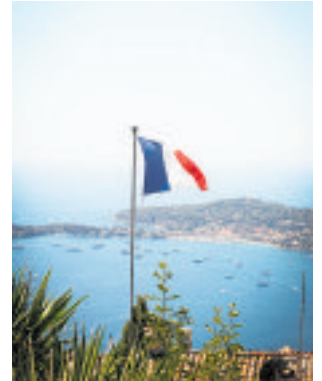
We stayed at Villa Maia, a luxurious hotel on the hilltop above Lyon's old town with stunning views of the city and its two great rivers, the Rhone and Saone. One night is enough to see the

sights, so the next morning we picked up our rental car (there is a large rental centre at the train station) and hit the road.

It's not always easy to follow the old route as it's no longer called the "RN7" — but my best advice is to break the drive into small chunks and set your satnav to "avoid motorways" and "avoid tolls". Don't worry too much if you stray a bit here and there; following the RN7 is less about precision and more about intention.



Orange is dominated by the ruins of its ancient amphitheatre, one of the best preserved in Europe; end your journey in Cote d'Azur; below, the RN7 takes you through the Rhone Valley. Photos / 123rf, Unsplash



The stretch leaving Lyon is in fact one of the easier parts to follow — it's marked as the "N7" and you are guided by a succession of famous towns: Vienne, Valence, Orange, Avignon. Once free of Lyon's sprawl, we ignored signs for the Autoroute with great satisfaction and settled into a slow pace along the single lane N7, passing small villages, flat open farmland and roadside restaurants, which admittedly looked as though they'd seen better days. Still, all part of the charm.

Our first stop was Valence for lunch at the three Michelin-starred Restaurant Pic, which has been in the same family for over a century and is now run by Anne-Sophie Pic, the only female chef in France to have the three-star accolade. It's a restaurant synonymous with the RN7, having been moved from its original location in the 1950s by Anne-Sophie's grandfather Andre, precisely to take advantage of the traffic making its way past the restaurant. After arriving nearly half an hour late (it was an early lesson in just how slow the slow road can be), the slight stress of the journey melted away amongst exquisitely crafted dishes such as Provençal tomato with lavender, and lamb with bergamot mint.

South of Valence, the N7 really begins to shine as the landscape opens out on both sides of the road, filled with green meadows and forests in the distance. We took a small detour to the hilltop



Pick up fresh produce from French markets in small towns; vintage bottles of wine from Chateauneuf-du-Pape. Photos / Unsplash, 123rf

village of Marsanne and spent the night at the cute boutique hotel Pantoufle, in the heart of the village. In the late afternoon, we wandered the narrow medieval streets up to St Felix church, then followed a shaded walking path overlooking the valley below.

The next morning, we cut back to the N7 and stopped briefly in Montelimar, famous for being the home of nougat. Although shops selling nougat were conspicuously absent, the town was fully alive with a Saturday morning market, and we stocked up on fresh local strawberries, tomatoes and peaches before driving on to Orange.

One of the route's essential stops, the road sweeps right past the Roman Arc de Triomphe before leading into the heart of town, dominated by the ruins of its ancient amphitheatre, one of the best preserved in Europe and well worth a visit.

Heading south, you enter the heart of the Rhone Valley, where vineyards dominate the landscape. Feeling the vines' siren call, we stopped for a wine tasting and tour at Le Prieure des Papes and wandered through the vineyards in the late afternoon sun before spending the night at La Mere Germaine, a legendary hotel and restaurant in the Rhone's most iconic wine village, Chateauneuf-du-Pape.

Opened in 1922, La Mere Germaine was once a must-stop for travellers heading south along the RN7. A century later, it's been restored by the owner of Le Prieure des Papes and has reclaimed its former glory, complete with a

Michelin star.

Leaving the Rhone, the road curves southeastward away from Avignon, as it trundles through the heart of Provence. Aix-en-Provence is the region's biggest city and well worth a stop for lunch and a visit to the old studio of Cezanne, the city's most famous son. From here, the road (now labelled as the DN7) heads east through a series of small towns that were once at the heart of the route — Saint-Maximin-la-Sainte-Baume; Brignoles; and Les Arcs — many of which still display the famous old red and white RN7 road markers. We stayed the night in the pretty medieval village of Les Arcs and feasted on treats like pate en croute and rillettes from the counter of the local butcher.

From Les Arcs, the flat open expanses of lush vineyards are gradually replaced by pine trees and craggy mountains as the road winds along precarious cliff edges (not for the faint-hearted) to the sun-kissed promised land of the Cote d'Azur.

Any one of its beach towns could be your final destination, from glitzy Cannes to the laid-back town of Theoule-sur-Mer. We headed a little further along the coast to Cap d'Antibes and spent our final night at the newly opened Villa Mirae, a luxurious yet low-key hotel just a minute's walk from the beach. We walked the rocky path around the coastline and swam in the clear blue Mediterranean, before sitting down to dinner at the hotel's restaurant, Amarines, run by superstar chef Mauro Colagreco.

Over prawn carpaccio and a glass of Provence rosé there was time to reflect on whether our six-day journey along the RN7 had really been worth it — ultimately, the autoroute would have taken us from Lyon to Cap d'Antibes in five hours, but we would have missed out on so much along the way. On Route Nationale 7, the journey really is the destination.