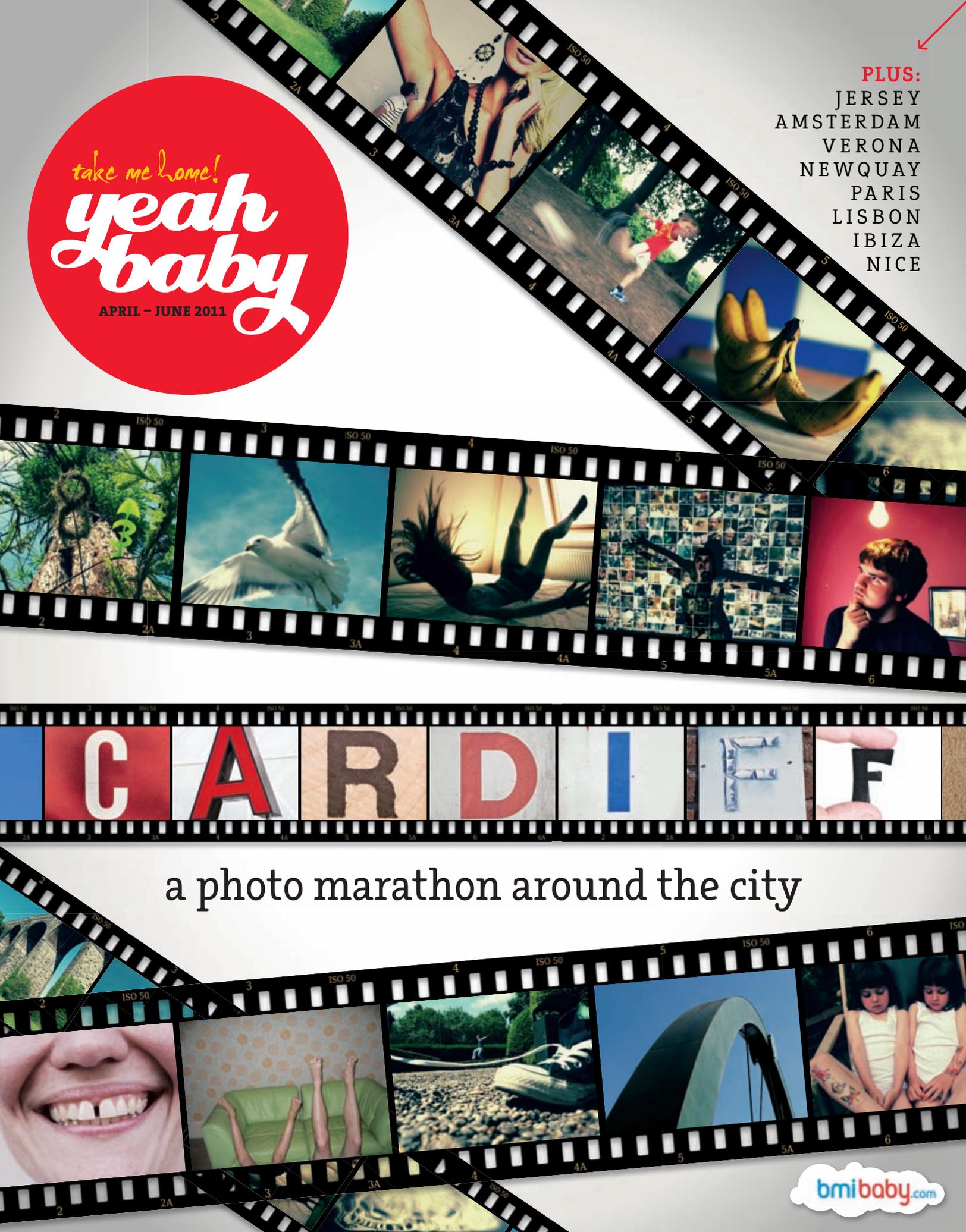




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# Vertigo

in the Verdon Gorge

From pedal boats to suicidal goats, it's all there to be discovered in a cavernous corner of Provence, just 85km (52 miles) from Nice

BY MARIE BARBIERI

📍 I'm blockaded 600m above the River Verdon, trapped on a one-way road that's barely wide enough to swing a mountain goat on.

I was driving the cliff-clasping Route des Crêtes, a 23km loop off the Verdon Gorge's 130km circuit, but am now on the crown of its tortuous topography, nose-to-nose with a herd of horned locals hanging out mid-road. I almost feel the tickle of a goatee as one inspects my dashboard through the open window. And just behind its hooves, chest-bruising, mouth-dropping views

plunge into the creviced chasm. Silencing the engine, I wait for the roadblock to dissipate. As the sun creeps up the jagged ramparts that soar through droplet-bearing clouds, so too do these handsome ibex, evaporating from the road onto their suicidal ledges.

Creeping along, I trace the gorge's palpitation-inducing Corniche Sublime (also known as the D71), with sheer drops of over 600m. Through the glittering mist, it's a magical tour along a lunar landscape; nature's tiara, fastened by hairpin bends. >

The Verdon River has gouged a 25km incision through the limestone gorge. Only in 1905 did Edouard Alfred Martel, a speleologist (that's a cave explorer to you and me), complete the first survey of it on a three-day exploration, tracing it onto the international tourist's map. The landscape alternates from luminescent lakes and lush yawning valleys, to perilous switchbacks towering above quaint villages that cower below.

The medieval village of Castellane sits at an altitude of 724m on the north rim of the gorge. Clasp protectively around Place Marcel Sauvaire, it oozes old-fashioned Provençal charm. Needling my way through the sounds and smells of the Saturday-morning market, I find all sorts of delights, from lavender oil to creamy brie. Looking up, I clock the towering Notre Dame du Roc church, teetering on the edge of a chalky escarpment which screams out to be climbed.

Up I wheeze on the crumbly 184m-high path that edges a Roman settlement's ancient walls. I reach the 1703-built chapel, where my huffs and puffs give way to the ripe harmony of nature. A brown-bodied griffon vulture, with his hood of white fur, looms over the Verdon river cascading by the old quarter of the village.

Now I'm up, I want to get down and wet. I head 4.6km north to Lac de Castillon and venture over its imposing dam. Concentrating on the road becomes challenging, as otherworldly aquamarine waters hijack my eyes to the left.

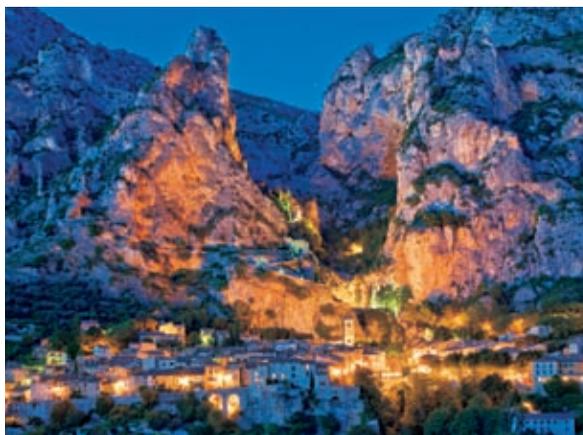
Pulling over to a tiny beach, I saunter in for a soothing swim, but hastily exit in comical Buster

Keaton style. This water is seriously cold, perhaps because Lac de Castillon sinks to an icy depth of 100m. That's enough to give even a seabed-dwelling nurse shark goosebumps.

Today, I arrive at Moustiers Sainte Marie via carpeted fields of fragrant lavender. Wedged into a cleft between an amphitheatrical cliff-face at an altitude of 630m, this hamlet is one of France's most picturesque. Home to world-famous, hand-decorated *faïence* (tin-glazed pottery), elegant plates, clocks, lamps and mirrors all tick, flash and shine out at you from faienceries on almost every corner.

A waterfall dances into the town's centre, dividing it into two halves, with a quirky characteristic clasping them together. A 227m-wide iron chain hangs from the cliffs' twin peaks, with a mysterious star at its centre. >

**BELOW** The town of Moustiers Sainte Marie  
**BOTTOM** An inquisitive horned local on the Route des Crêtes



PHOTOGRAPHY: MARIE BARBIER, GETTY



## GETTING SOME ACTION

The Verdon Gorge offers the thrill-seeking visitor a range of activities. Try these out:

> Lie back and think of France from a pedalo with JPR. Start at Galetas Beach and pedal through Lac de Sainte Croix and then on into the gorge.

Tel: +33 (0)4 9484 2318,  
[www.aiguines.com/jpr](http://www.aiguines.com/jpr)

> Float your boat in an inflatable canoe with Base Sport & Nature. Journey from Castellane on the simmering cauldron of the Verdon River.

Tel: +33 (0)4 9305 4118,  
[www.basesportnature.com](http://www.basesportnature.com)

> Get high – about 200m high – climbing the gorge's dizzying crags with La Corditelle at various exhilarating spots around the Aiguines area of the gorge. Tel: +33 (0)6 1049 5192, [www.lacorditelle.com](http://www.lacorditelle.com)

> Ride on a trusted paraglider with Natur'éléments. Take off near Saint Andre Les Alpes, which lies on the northern tip of Lac de Castillon.

Tel: +33 (0)6 2833 2315,  
[www.naturelements.com](http://www.naturelements.com)

> Abseil over the abyss with Guides Aventure. Descend from La Palud sur Verdon, off the thrilling Route des Crêtes, up to 300m into the canyon.

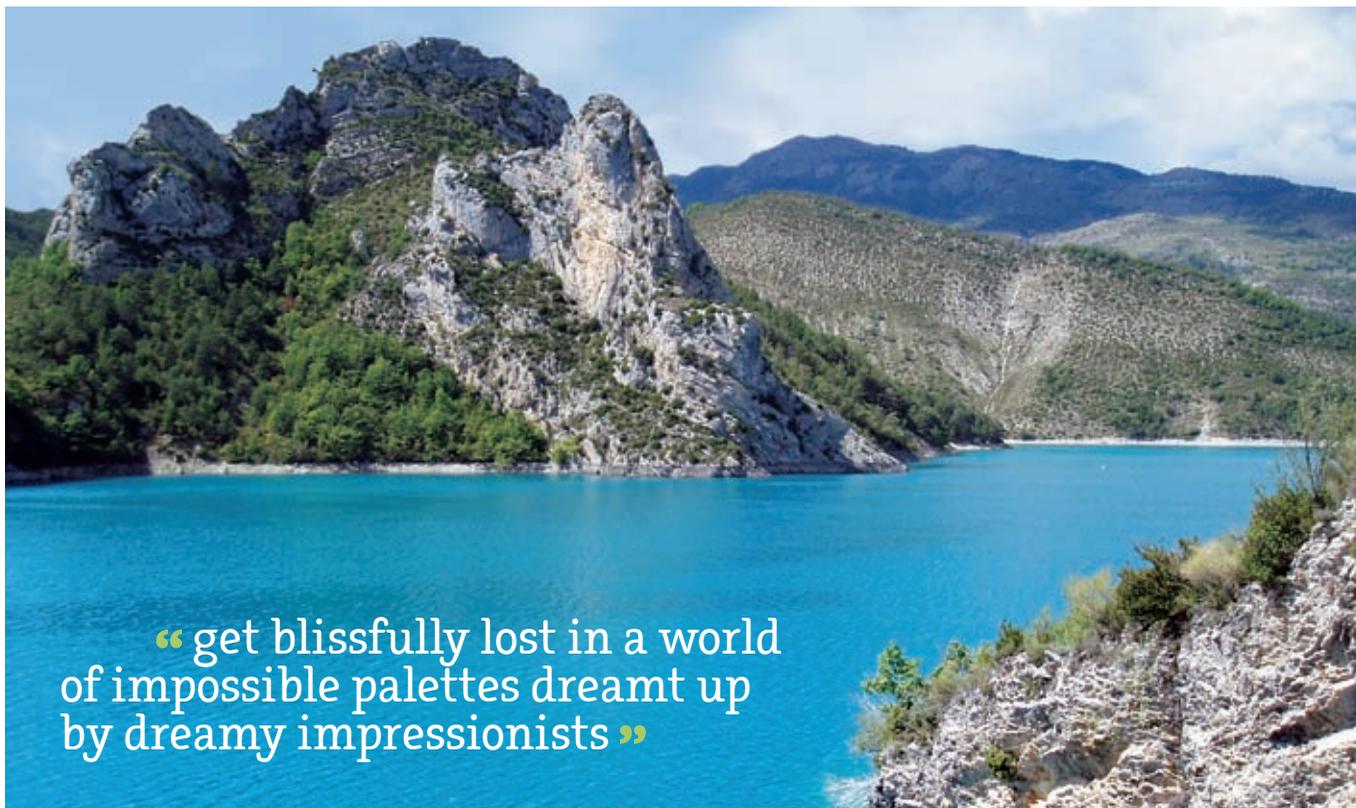
Tel: +33 (0)6 8594 4661,  
[www.guidesaventure.com](http://www.guidesaventure.com)

> Take to the rapids on a raft with Aboard Rafting. The location changes according to water levels, but it's usually in the Fontgaillarde gorges.

Tel: +33 (0)4 9283 7611,  
[www.aboard-rafting.com](http://www.aboard-rafting.com)

> Bungee-jump with Latitude Challenge from the Pont de l'Artuby, where you'll plummet down 182m of heavenly hell!

Tel: +33 (0)4 9109 0410,  
[www.latitude-challenge.fr](http://www.latitude-challenge.fr)



“get blissfully lost in a world of impossible palettes dreamt up by dreamy impressionists”

The legend says the original was first hung by the Knight of Blacas, who returned to the village after the Crusades. Due to weathering, the current star is the 11th to hang here.

Beneath it, I join a trail of human ants and climb up the vertiginous cliff-cut stairway to the 8th-century Notre Dame de Beauvoir chapel. Although pilgrimages have been taking place here since the year 470 (a temple stood here previously), the hairy trek of 260-plus steps cause my thighs to bicker audibly. The view that silences them is of the village's patchwork of red-tiled roofs, shimmering olive groves spilling into the Maire Valley and Lac de Sainte Croix beckoning in the distance.

Over 30m beneath the diamond-dappled ripples of the electric-turquoise Lac de Sainte Croix, the village of Les Salles lies resting. It lived and breathed until the mid 1970s, when a hydroelectric dam was built, drowning it with a new artificial lake. But Les Salles was known as 'the village that refused to die', and now survives rebuilt overlooking the lake. Renamed Les Salles sur Verdon, some of the old vestiges were saved, such as the bell tower from the original church and the village water fountain. The tourism office showcases nostalgic black and white photos mourning the dynamited village.

The rippled lid of Lac de Sainte Croix is just over six miles long and two miles wide. It merits its status as one of the most beautiful

European lakes, with its oak and pine-fringed waterside hugging canary-yellow beaches. Heading north over the Pont du Galetas, enchanting views unravel of frolicking bathers and pedal-boaters.

Immediately, I swap wheels for pedals and pedalo into the throat of the gorge. Here, the most misleading of travel brochures would struggle to exaggerate the blue and green hues lapping at yellow-and-white pinstriped cliffs. I get blissfully lost in a world of impossible palettes dreamt up by the dreamiest of impressionists.

For further information, check out the Provence Tourism website, [www.provenceweb.fr](http://www.provenceweb.fr)

**ABOVE** The splendidly turquoise Lac de Castellon

**BELOW** Castellane and the River Verdon



## WHERE TO STAY

Snore in a tent, mobile home or chalet at the four-star Domaine du Verdon. Nestled within the tree-flanked cliffs of Castellane, this superb camping and caravanning site also offers a boating pond, crazy golf, and volleyball and basketball activities. On site are a pizzeria, crêperie, bar and several heated swimming pools. For the gorge itself, Domaine du Verdon can arrange adrenalin-fatiguing water-sport activities, as well as fishing, cycling, quad biking and horse riding.  
Tel: +33 (0)4 9283 6129,  
[www.camp-du-verdon.com](http://www.camp-du-verdon.com)

## GETTING THERE

The Verdon Gorge is about 85km, or a 90-minute drive, from Nice Airport. bmibaby flies to Nice from Birmingham and East Midlands from just £40.99 one-way, incl taxes. For more information log on to [www.bmibaby.com](http://www.bmibaby.com)