

# WRITTEN IN THE

# STARS

France's cosmic wonders have seen three of its open spaces designated International Dark Sky Reserves. **Richard Webber** shares the sites with a starring role

**V**incent van Gogh once said: "I know nothing with any certainty, but the sight of the stars makes me dream." And he isn't the only one who has found fulfilment in the night sky, as the increase in telescope sales and emergence of stargazing holidays prove. Nothing beats looking up to the heavens on a clear night, away from the blight of light pollution. Staring in awe at the millions of shimmering stars is enough to make anyone dream, just like Van Gogh.

There are myriad swathes of France containing rural

open spaces to delight anyone wanting to admire the cosmic wonders above us. In fact, three regions have been officially recognised by the International Dark Sky Association – an American-based non-profit organisation working to protect the night skies for present and future generations. Pic du Midi, Cévennes National Park and Alpes Azur Mercantour have been awarded the prestigious status of International Dark Sky Reserve, joining the other 13 certified reserves around the world. ▶



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## What are International Dark Sky Reserves?

They're public or private land of substantial size (at least 700 square kilometres) possessing an exceptional or distinguished quality of starry nights and nocturnal environment specifically protected for, among other

reasons, their scientific, natural and educational interests. To qualify for consideration, minimum requirements include a sufficient number of communities within the Dark Sky Reserve adopting

a comprehensive lighting management plan to control and limit light pollution. Amazingly, sky glow, which hides stars from our sight, can affect areas hundreds of miles away from urban development.



### Pic du Midi

The first of France's International Dark Sky Reserves, the Pic du Midi, is found in a mountainous southwestern region and comprises a Unesco World Heritage Site (Pyrénées-Mont Perdu) and the Pyrenees National Park. The region is visited by around 1.5 million people annually.

Efforts to earn the area Dark Sky status began in 1990 when budget cuts threatened the closure of its observatory and leading astronomical research facilities. Thankfully, the sterling efforts of its supporters averted closure of the site, which is named after a peak within the reserve.

All around this region mountain tops rise beyond

9,800 feet – such as the 10,820-foot Pic du Vignemale, highest in the French Pyrenees – while six large valleys are found here, including Azun and Luz.

The National Park's countless attractions include over 200 miles of waymarked footpaths, ski resorts, tiny and characterful mountain villages, luscious landscapes and the obligatory mountain roads – complete with hairpin bends!

Accessible to everyone year-round is Pic du Midi and its observatory housing Europe's highest planetarium. Around 135,000 people a year take the scenic cable car ride to the 9,438-foot summit. Standing on the large terrace, you can see for miles. The panoramic view encompasses over 200 miles of





mountains and during a clear night the expansive starry skies are breathtaking.

Nature lovers will delight in knowing that the national park has a rich, unique plant and animal life. More than 4,000 animal species, including bears and lizards, and 2,500 different plants have been recorded.

While you're in the area, make sure you visit Lourdes, with its 1,000-year-old castle fort in the foothills, and the Cirque de Gavarnie. This huge amphitheatre-like valley is surrounded by limestone mountains soaring high into the pure Pyrenean air. Within the cirque you'll discover the Gavarnie Falls: at 1,384 feet, it's the highest waterfall in mainland France. ▶

**Above:**  
The Pic du Midi observatory overlooks the Pyrenean peaks

**Top right:**  
Another place to visit is Lourdes

**Above right:**  
The Pont d'Espagne, a tourist attraction near Cauterets

**Left:**  
Stargazers making the most of the clear skies

## GETTING THERE

Until recently, Ryanair flew directly to Lourdes from the UK and hopefully flights will resume again shortly. Toulouse Airport, reached via several direct flights, is a 2hr 30min drive from Pic du Midi.

## WHERE TO STAY

**Hotel Le Montaigu**

**Luz-Saint-Sauveur**

Tel: 0033 (0)5 62 92 81 71  
[lemontaigu.com](http://lemontaigu.com)

This three-star hotel is minutes from the town centre (pictured) and offers comfortable accommodation from €80 per night.



## WHERE TO EAT

**Le 2877 Restaurant**

**Pic du Midi**

Tel: 0033 (0)8 25 00 28 77  
[picdumidi.com](http://picdumidi.com)

You'll feel on top of the world – literally – when you dine at contemporary Le 2877, atop Pic du Midi. The mountainscapes through the floor-to-ceiling windows will have you mesmerised. Outdoor seating available in clement weather. Certainly worth booking in advance.



## Cévennes National Park

It's Europe's largest International Dark Sky Reserve, covering nearly 1,390 square miles of four French *départements*: Aveyron, Gard, Ardèche and Lozère. An area stretching from the Languedoc region to the Mediterranean, where over the centuries snaking rivers have carved deep valleys to form a rugged landscape preventing any sizeable urban development.

Situated in the southeastern corner of the Massif Central, the national park contains high plateaus and craggy peaks, including Mont Aigoual and the lofty Mont Lozère, the region's highest mountain, whose ridges stretch across 24 miles. This peaceful corner of France is home to just over 71,000 people, many of whom work in the 400 plus farms scattered across this rural landscape. The most populated town is Le Vigan with a population just under 4,000.

Unquestionably among the darker spots in southern France, it's not only popular with stargazing enthusiasts. Other favoured activities include mountain biking, kayaking and fishing. Meanwhile, walkers enjoy exploring 3,000 miles of waymarked paths and the eight

long-distance hiking trails criss-crossing the national park.

The region hosts stargazing events, including La Nuit du Causse Noir. This three-day gathering, usually in July, is based at the Les Pradines campsite in the village of Lanuéjols, an area known for its wide spaces and exceptionally starry skies. Tickets for the last event cost €35 per adult, including three nights' camping, and €15 for children (aged from four to 15).

During the day, you'll never be short of things to do and see. Being an area of wild, unspoilt countryside, must-sees include the many gorges, such as the Gorges du Tarn, a huge canyon punctuated by tiny villages. Another highlight is the Caves of Aven Armand. Discovered in the 1890s, the huge underground chamber is packed with stunning stalagmites, including the Grand Stalagmite. At over 90 feet, it's reputedly the world's largest.

And why not jump in the saddle and try some horse-riding or don walking boots and stroll the many trails, arguably the best way to truly appreciate these rich landscapes? Alternatively, hire a car and travel along quiet roads lined with beech and pine groves.



The observatory at Mont Aigoual offers panoramic views



The Cévennes is ideal for hikers and horse riders



Maison du Parc des Cévennes

### GETTING THERE

The nearest airports for the Cévennes National Park are at Montpellier, Nîmes and Rodez. While easyJet is among the airlines flying to Montpellier, Ryanair offers flights to both Nîmes and Rodez.

### WHERE TO STAY

**Hôtel de France, Mende**  
Tel: 0033 (0)4 66 65 00 04  
[hotelfrance-mende.com](http://hotelfrance-mende.com)  
Located on the edge of the national park, this 38-room, three-star hotel in the quiet

town of Mende offers a warm welcome, decent food and rooms with a view overlooking the Pré-Vival Gardens. Prices from around €95 per night.

### WHERE TO EAT

**Les Voûtes, Mende**  
Tel: 0033 (0)4 66 49 00 05  
[les-voutes.com](http://les-voutes.com)

Situated in a former 18th-century convent a stone's throw from the cathedral, the menu offers everything from pizza to delicious pork tenderloin.





### Alpes Azur Mercantour

France's newest Dark Sky Reserve encompasses 75 municipalities with a combined population of around 55,000. Covering nearly 890 square miles, it boasts three primary areas, including Mercantour National Park and the Gorges de Daluis Regional Nature Reserve, where visitors are entranced by the sight of over 3,000 stars on a clear night.

Located in the southern Alps, it's clear why this region has seduced astronomers for centuries. Mont Mounier, alias Black Mountain, rises to over 9,200 feet and is home to one of

### Landscapes within this Dark Sky Reserve range from craggy peaks draped in larch forests to Alpine flower-strewn pastures and picturesque lakes

the first mountain observatories. Amateur astronomers' favourite locations, meanwhile, include the Calern and Dina plateaus.

The diverse landscapes within this Dark Sky Reserve range from craggy peaks and hills draped in larch forests to wide Alpine flower-strewn

**Above:**  
The dramatic peaks of the National Park

pastures and picturesque lakes. Inevitably, the area attracts its fair share of tourists, whether that's to enjoy skiing in the winter months or explore the natural landscapes at other times of the year. Activities such as walking, kayaking and paragliding are popular, too. The region's proximity to the Côte d'Azur and Nice is an added bonus.

Hire a car and drive the twisting roads to mountain villages while admiring the photogenic scenery en route. Comprising six valleys, such as Verdon and Vésubie, the Mercantour National Park is a ▶



Night-time in the Mercantour National Park

particularly popular area. Close to the Italian border, it's rich in flora and fauna with surveys identifying over 2,000 species of plants. And like the other Dark Sky Reserves, it has plenty of footpaths: the vast network includes the Grande Traversée du Mercantour, covering 131 miles from Estenc to Menton.

Must-visit places include Vallée des Merveilles, a narrow remote

canyon where 36,000 plus Bronze Age pictures are carved into the rock. A drive through the Gorges de Daluis, a remarkable network of scarlet-coloured ravines, is not to be missed either, while a stop at Arboretum Marcel Kroenlein is recommended. The brainchild of Monaco's Prince Rainier, over 15 hectares of this steep-sided location are carpeted in flowers, sculptures and trees. 🌿

### GETTING THERE

Many people wanting to explore the Alpes Azur Mercantour region fly in to Nice Airport, which is serviced by several airlines, including BA and easyJet.

### WHERE TO STAY

#### **Parc National du Mercantour**

[mercantour-parcnational.fr](http://mercantour-parcnational.fr). Why not breathe in the fresh Alpine air by staying a night or two at a mountain refuge in the heart of the Mercantour National Park? Meals are available at some lodges. Some open all year, others during summer only.

#### **Le Chalet du Germes Larche**

Tel: 0033 (0)6 88 32 11 90 [chaletdugermes.fr](http://chaletdugermes.fr)  
Close to the Italian border and a 2.5-hour drive from Nice, this family-run chalet

offers either three rooms with private bathroom, an apartment or dormitory accommodation. Meals are available. Situated a mile from Larche, this haven of tranquillity 5,905 feet above sea level is close to many walking routes and the beginning of Europe's highest road. A room for two people on B&B basis starts from €125.

### WHERE TO EAT

#### **Le Cheval Blanc**

Barcelonnette  
Tel: 0033 (0)4 92 81 00 19 [chevalblancbarcelonnette.com](http://chevalblancbarcelonnette.com)  
Run by four generations of the same family since 1911, the restaurant is open all year round and offers a menu which changes weekly, using local and seasonal products. Two courses from around €20.

PHOTOS: ANTHONY TURPAUD

## 3 more SPECTACULAR STARGAZING SPOTS

You're spoilt for choice when it comes to finding suitable locations for stargazing. Putting it simply, head into the countryside, well away from urban lighting and the heavens will open up to showcase the night sky in all its splendour. But if you're looking for locations which are magical in their own right, here are three suggestions:

### MONT BEUVRAY

This historic site straddling the borders of Nièvre and Saône-et-Loire in Burgundy rises to around 2,700 feet. Head up the wooded slopes to the open summit where you'll enjoy panoramic views.

### THE CAUSSES DU QUERCY NATURAL PARK

This extensive park in the southwestern corner of the Massif Central within the Midi-Pyrénées region contains many gems, including the pilgrimage village of Rocamadour. Its vast rural spaces are ideal for observing the stars.

### VIVARAIS

This ancient mountainous region in southeastern France is named after its capital, Viviers and boasts many open spots that are ideal for studying the stars.

### TOURIST INFORMATION

[france.fr](http://france.fr)  
[tourism-occitanie.co.uk](http://tourism-occitanie.co.uk)  
[tourism-alps-provence.com](http://tourism-alps-provence.com)  
[picdumidi.com](http://picdumidi.com)

### INTERNATIONAL DARK SKY ASSOCIATION

[darksky.org](http://darksky.org)



Above: Vivarais