

Tim Moore takes the Mercedes-Benz GLC along the winding roads of France's awe-inspiring grand canyon – Gorges du Verdon – with exhilarating views and precipitous drops at every turn



THE JOURNEY



Location:
GORGES DU VERDON

Distance:
132 MILES

Date:
JANUARY 2017



THE KIT
MERCEDES-BENZ GLC 220 D
4MATIC AMG LINE COUPE
ENGINE: 2143CC 4-CYLINDER DIESEL
TOP SPEED: 130MPH
0 - 62MPH: 8.2 SECONDS



Photography **Pete Goding**

A GRAND CANYON



From far left
The Mercedes-Benz
GLC parked up
by Lac de Sainte-
Croix, and again
at Lac Montpezat;
a Griffon vulture;
Moustiers-Sainte-
Marie; driving
in Comps-sur-
Artuby; canoeing
at Lac Montpezat
Previous page
Route des Crêtes



THE VERDON GORGE INTRODUCES ITSELF WITH A GENUINELY STARTLING VISUAL 'BOO!'



'me or the boat' ultimatum. The aesthetic appeal of his obsession, even in January, is undeniable. With a gaudy sunrise above and a dry-ice mist wafting across the glassy surface, the scene recalls one of rock's most fabled couplets: smoke on the water, a fire in the sky. For two hours, we don't see a soul.

Canoeing, Gaëtan-style, is a relaxed and bone-dry aquatic pastime, with plenty of paddle-in-your-lap drifting. Sitting upfront, I am nominally in charge of 'the power' – paddle on the left side only; long, steady strokes – with Gaëtan behind, using his paddle primarily to steer. As the lake narrows into a modest gorge, he tells me how the entire region was transformed when the Verdon was stoppered by a pair of hydroelectric dams in the 1970s. The lakes thereby created, including Montpezat and the vast Sainte-Croix, just upstream, delivered a flood of water-thirsty holidaymakers – and a welcome economy surge – to a previously neglected area.

In the blistering summer, boating novices are routinely seduced by the beckoning turquoise water – the Verdon's Caribbean tint is the legacy of powdered rock washed down from glaciers – but swiftly regret that 'refreshing' leap overboard. 'It is never more than 8°C in there,' says Gaëtan, dipping a wary finger

The biggest hole in Europe likes to keep itself to itself. Driving to it from Nice involves a lengthy inland trundle through desolate military training zones, the desiccated Provençal landscape so brown and bouldered that US special forces came here to acclimatise for Afghanistan. Traffic is sparse and settlements sparser still – the occasional clutch of chipped pantiles and careworn beige walls, places where scratchy livings have long been eked out. Then I park the Mercedes-Benz GLC at a lonely lay-by with a rust-scabbed viewpoint sign, and the Verdon Gorge introduces itself with a genuinely startling visual 'boo!' Beneath the hand rail and my whitened knuckles tolls out a plunging panorama of vertical rock and clinging vegetation, threaded at its very distant fundament by a little vein of water, garishly coloured like peppermint mouthwash. The Balcons de la Mescla, a savage karate chop through the landscape, is the southern introduction to our continent's deepest canyon, yet even five paces from the edge you'd never know it was there. At once I grasp just how this 15-mile-long, 2000ft-deep rent in the fabric of France could have kept itself secret for so long: until the early 20th century, the Verdon Gorge

was barely known beyond the scattering of shepherds and huntsmen who called this region home.

The D71, more poetically known as the Corniche Sublime, hugs the gorge's southern rim with reckless intimacy. On occasion, the road builders have hewn picture windows through the living rock, offering reminders of the steeping Gothic void you are perched atop and – on a crisp winter's afternoon – the sunset gilding its northern flank. In the days ahead, I am regularly grateful to find myself at the wheel of a compact 4x4, the ideal combo for all those gravelly, frost-cracked hairpins and narrow galleried tunnels. Then the gorge recedes, and the road delivers us gently downwards to the Bastide du Calalou. Cocooned beside the hotel's fireplace, I gaze out at a more benign holiday vista: the twilight, pine-topped hills of southern Provence, undulating restfully beyond the poolside olive and cypress trees.

'This water has changed my life,' says my guide Gaëtan Hémeri, as we lug his canoe over the chalky foreshore of Lac Montpezat the following dawn. A childhood kayaking holiday inspired him to move here from Lille as soon as he left education, and he later tells me that his first marriage ended after a



MORE THAN HALF OF FRANCE'S
TRUFFLES ARE BROUGHT UP FROM
THE REGION'S EARTH, AND MOST
END UP IN THE MARKET AT AUPS



Clockwise from
far left Dogs
replaced pigs as
truffle hunters
when the greedy
swine developed
a taste for their
rooted treasure;
Col de l'Olivier;
a ceramicist
glazes a plate in
Moustiers-Sainte-
Marie; La Truffe
chef Sébastien
Gaillard tops
many a dish with
truffles, including
scrambled eggs

KEEP IT LOCAL

TRUFFLES

A 'black diamond' is the essential culinary souvenir, but you must keep it cool and eat within a week. A jar of truffle butter from the Aups market makes a longer-lasting alternative.

BOAR

Since the 1980s, the sanglochon – a wild boar/pig hybrid – has multiplied out of control in sub-Alpine France. Eat some and do the eco-system and yourself a favour: it's beautifully dense and rich.

WINE

It's all about rosé around here. Some of the best comes from Domaine de Valcolombe (domaine-valcolombe.com): floral and almost golden in colour, they're the ideal partner to a truffle dish.

HONEY

The lavender fields produce some extraordinarily distinctive honeys. For the fullest taste experience, make sure it's 'cold extracted'.



in. 'After 90 second [sic], your body is in difficulty.'

The local fauna, though, are made of sterner stuff. As we glide back to the shore, Gaëtan nods at a pinch point upstream where wild boar swim across with up to 20 piglets in tow. 'I see them many times here in the morning, also fox, chamois, badger...' He gazes around his realm and lets out the contented sigh of man who is living the dream. 'The best for me is night, when the full moon, water and rock become the same silver colour and everything is so, so quiet.'

The deeply rutted track back to the road allows the GLC to dabble with a little high-clearance soft-roading, which it enjoys almost as much as I do. Then it's around the huge shoreline of Lac Sainte-Croix to Moustiers-Sainte-Marie, northern gateway to the Verdon Gorge and officially one of France's hundred prettiest villages. Unofficially, it's one of the most dramatic, hunkered up in the lee of a towering limestone bluff to escape the worst of the Mistral that bends every exposed tree trunk towards the Med.

My punishing walk up to the ancient cliff-perched chapel that crowns Moustiers is rewarded by another of those dizzying vistas that define this journey. Beneath, a twisty compaction of steeples, ceramic workshops and 'Allo 'Allo! -era bistros, bisected

by a gurgling mountain river; beyond, an eternity of hibernating lavender fields. The chapel was a pilgrimage site for centuries, and the monks who came here from across Europe brought with them a secret skill that the locals parlayed into a durable speciality: the creation of enamelled earthenware. 'After more than 20 years, every day still brings a surprise,' says Franck Scherer, one of the town's 15 faïence artisans, when I meet him in an atelier crammed with well-fed cats and delicate crockery in various stages of completion. 'Such suspense when I open the kiln,' he smiles, deftly knocking a chapati-sized disc of clay from his work-table spinner. 'Sometimes a splendid result, sometimes a horror!' The walls are decorated with letters of appreciation from a customer list including George Bush and François Mitterrand, and Franck is currently working on a dinner service for the new king of Thailand.

Like the clay that helped put Moustiers on the map, the region's principal delicacy is harvested from below the rocky, barren soil. The next morning begins with a Bastide breakfast that pays tribute to it: scrambled egg densely speckled with shavings of nutty black truffle. For the past two days, I've seen rustic characters roaming the hillsides with dogs, engaged in one of

this area's traditional winter activities: rooting out 'black diamonds', and scaring off truffle-hungry wild boar before they beat them to it. More than half of France's truffles are brought up from the region's earth, and most end up in the market at Aups, a pretty but rather forgotten little town trying to make a name for itself as 'la ville de la truffe'. As I learn at a new and glitzy visitor centre on the main square, tuber melanosporum – the black truffle – is the world's most expensive fungus, growing among the roots of hazel and oak trees that are now planted in groves for this purpose. Then it's up the road to the kitchens of La Truffe (restaurantlatruffe.com) for a more hands-on, mouth-in demonstration.

Sébastien Gaillard, the restaurant's exuberant rock-star chef, is an evangelist and innovator, forever finding new ways to inveigle truffles into his menu. 'From entrée to dessert,' he grins, pulling out a roasting tin packed with pungent, conker-sized nuggets from the fridge and placing it under his worktop's low-slung copper lamps. 'Here you have maybe €2000 of truffes.' He picks one out, sniffs it dreamily, then chops it in two to reveal densely packed white veins. 'This is a premier choix truffle, which gives the best flavour.' In the next hour I watch Sébastien diminish his hoard, artfully

shaving, grating and slicing indulgent chunks of it over everything from foie gras to ginger ice-cream, and inviting me to savour the results. In his hands, a truffle is somehow coaxed to add a layer of spice, cocoa or even strawberry notes to a dish. All are stupendous.

Fully infused with black diamonds, I ease the GLC's electric steering column a little further away from my waistline and drive back north to the start of the truffle's journey. Le Domaine de Majastre (domaine-de-majastre.fr), a four-square, 16th-century manor house, is styled by owner, Philippe de Santis, as 'the kingdom of the truffle': his 60 hectares of oak-planted groves offer up 500kg of black truffles in a good year; not bad business with prices hovering around €1000 per kilo. From there I head out into the frosted fields with truffle hunter Nicolas Planchon and his three dogs, all bespoke hybrids bred at the Domaine, and trained there from birth by having truffles flaked

extravagantly over their puppy food. No wonder each is worth around €4000. 'In the old times, they had pigs for this work,' he says. 'But pigs are too greedy. They find a truffle; they eat it. If you try to stop them, they eat your finger.' He shows me an under-toothed smile.

Nicolas has been working the Majastre groves for 12 years, and monitors the dogs' snuffling with a practised eye. Every few minutes, one of them starts scrabbling with intent and Nicolas trots over to work at the stony red earth with his sawn-off pickaxe. The soil-encrusted lumps that end up in his muddy pockets look like unpromising seed potatoes; I can see at once why, for many centuries, truffles were dismissed as peasant food. But later, cleaned up and weighed out in the Domaine's cellar, each melanosporum exudes the knobbly, mystical gleam of a pocket meteorite. 'For you,' says

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GET ACTIVE!

CANOEING

Canoe Verdon offers four-hour accompanied daytime or sunset trips for €30pp. Five-hour 'full moon' evening trips are €35pp. canoe-verdon.com

TRUFFLING

The €115 'truffle discovery' experience at Domaine de Majastre includes an afternoon truffle hunting with dogs, as well as bed, breakfast and a well-truffled dinner. domaine-de-majastre.fr/truffles

CANYONING

A high-octane experience in the Verdon Gorge: descend a ravine by abseiling, climbing and swimming. canyoningverdon.net

HIKING

The Sentier Blanc-Martel route follows the bold footsteps of the two locals who first mapped the Verdon Gorge in 1905. You'll need six hours, a head for heights and a torch for the path's many tunnels.



EVERY FEW MINUTES,
ONE OF THE DOGS STARTS
SCRABBLING AT THE RED
EARTH WITH INTENT



Clockwise from left Moustiers-Sainte-Marie; the view from Route de la Corniche Sublime; truffle hunter Nicolas Planchon and his dogs; a truffle-adorned lunch in Moustiers-Sainte-Marie; Bauduen on the edge of Lac de Sainte-Croix; canoeing at Lac Montpezat; Château d'Aiguines by Lac de Sainte-Croix





THE SOIL-ENCRUSTED LUMPS THAT END UP IN HIS MUDDY POCKETS LOOK LIKE SEED POTATOES

Left Owner of Le Domaine de Majastre – or 'the kingdom of the truffle' – Philippe de Santis

Philippe de Santis, placing one in my grateful hands.

The only appropriate farewell is a drive around the D952, the Route des Crêtes that tracks the Verdon Gorge's south-facing sunny side. The vistas at its height are of an entirely different order: higher, wider, deeper. Griffon vultures circle idly in a holding pattern, waiting for another boar or deer or selfie-snapping tourist to lose their footing. With a sheen of ice covering every shadow in the road, permanent four-wheel drive is keenly appreciated. No more so than when I round a switchback and find the road closed by barriers, right beside a 2000ft wall of death. As a souvenir of my trip, that truffle only survives two days and four plates of millionaire's pasta. But that 13-point U-turn will stay with me for ever.



John Plumer

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* See p119 for T&Cs

THE CAR

MERCEDES-BENZ GLC 220 D 4MATIC AMG LINE COUPE



Spec

Price: £42,785
Engine: 2143cc
4-cylinder diesel
Power: 168bhp
Torque: 295lb ft
Transmission:
9-speed automatic
Performance:
0 – 62mph in
8.2 sec, 130mph
Combined mpg: 56.5
CO₂: 143 g/km
Boot space: (min/max
litres) 500/1400
Website: mercedes-benz.co.uk

STYLING

In fastback coupé form, the GLC is a more rakish proposition than boxier soft-road compacts. Those bold curves and slanted headlights make its most obvious rival, the BMW X4, seem a little dumpy. The sporty AMG Line interior looks the part, too. But style comes at a price: the coupé is almost £3000 dearer than an identically equipped standard GLC.

PERFORMANCE

Diesel technology has come a long way, but there's only so much you can do with a 2.1 lump, and we sometimes felt a little short-changed. It's also fair to say that the GLC's dynamic looks aren't always reflected in its handling. The standard nine-speed auto box is a triumph of Mercedes engineering, though, and the GLC's permanent four-wheel drive made for sure-footed progress on icy roads – and off them.



TECHNOLOGY

Our GLC came with a full house of driver aids: radar cruise, lane and blind-spot assistance, pedestrian detection with autonomous braking and active parking assist. The driverless future really is almost upon us. The three-colour ambient interior lighting package was fun, but the media and Sat Nav screen seemed a little low res by 2017 standards.

PRACTICALITY

That fastback roofline sacrifices a fair bit of luggage space, and the back seat can seem a little claustrophobic, but there are neat little stowing hatches all over the car, including a collapsible box in the floor of the boot. The GLC is aimed at the discreetly adventurous, and it certainly has the right blend of comfort and soft-road versatility to get them where they want to go.



+ THE NAME

GL stands for Geländewagen Luxus, or 'luxury offroader'. And the C? Well, it's based on a C-class.



+ THE BRAND HERITAGE

Co-founder Gottlieb Daimler effectively invented the car in 1885. His signature is etched on Mercedes windcreens.



+ THE FUTURE

The Mercedes-Maybach 6 is an extraordinary 18ft-long grand tourer with a 738hp electric motor. At this stage, though, it's just a concept.