

## 50 The Great Verdon Gorge

The most splendid gorge in Europe

**Chalet de la Maline – Brèche d'Imbert – Couloir Samson – Point Sublime**

**Location:** Moustiers-Sté-Marie, 631m.

**Starting point:** From Moustiers drive along the wide panoramic D 952 up the Verdon Valley towards la Palud. There take the D 23 rightwards (fine views) to the Chalet de la Maline (893m) a refuge hut belonging to the CAF, 28km from Moustiers.

**End of Walk:** Auberge du Point Sublime (783m) on the D 952. Return journey to Chalet de la Maline by taxi (best to make a reservation beforehand).

**Walking time:** La Maline – Brèche d'Imbert: nearly 2½ hrs; Brèche d'Imbert – 2<sup>nd</sup> tunnel: 2¾ hrs; 2<sup>nd</sup> tunnel – Point Sublime: 50 min; total time: 6 hrs.

**Ascent/Descent:** About 470m of descent and 350m of ascent.

**Lowest point:** 558m in gorge.

**Grade:** Adequate, well marked paths, but not always very wide. Sure-footedness and



*The harmless Aesculapius snake – here in the first tunnel – grows up to two metres in length.*

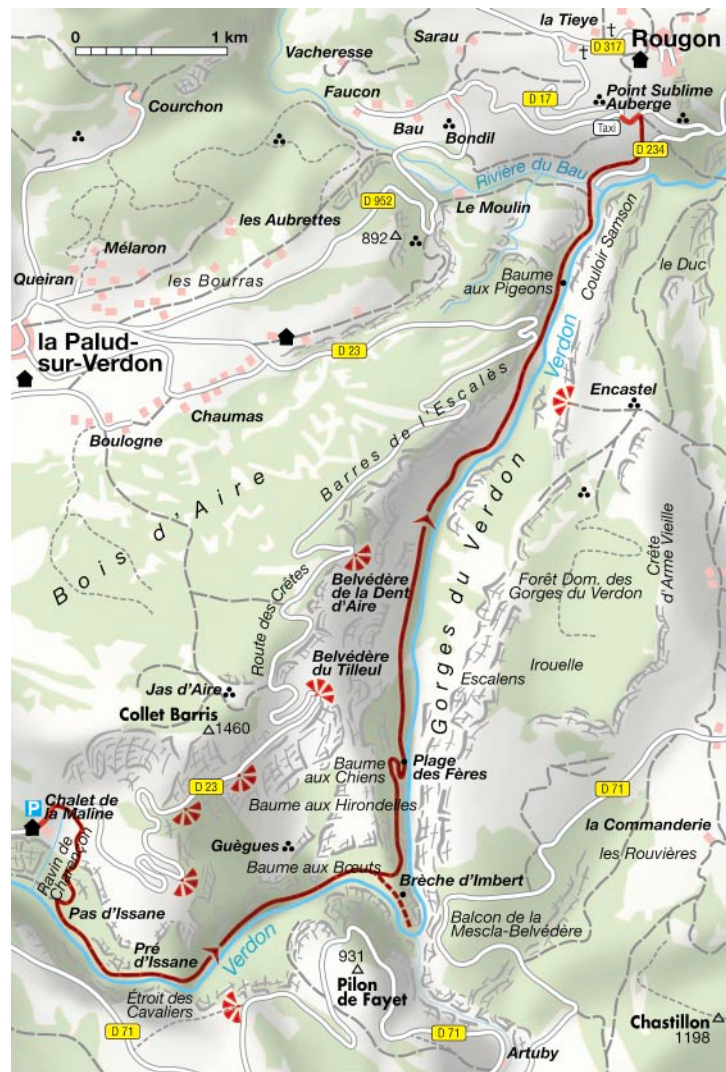
a head for heights are required, particularly on the steep metal steps.

**Alternative:** From P. 633m there is a worthwhile spur path, which leads off to Mescla, at the junction of the Verdon and the Artuby, at which the latter forms a narrower gorge; a good 30 minutes, there and back.

**Advice:** A torch is indispensable for the 700m-long tunnel at the end. In summer, especially at weekends, there are a lot of people in the gorge. Only undertake the walk in good weather, as due to the narrowness of the gorge, thunderstorms can only be noticed late on and they can be pretty severe.

**Places of Interest:** The walk should be completed by a drive around the gorge on the wide, panoramic road (D 952, D 23 to the north, D 71 to the south) on both sides of the river, which has numerous vantage points from which unforgettable views into the depths of the mighty gorge can be obtained.

*The entrance to the long tunnel.*



The Grand Canyon du Verdon can be described as the smaller brother of the North-American Grand Canyon. The accessible section along the Sentier Martel offers an incomparable experience in this grandiose natural wonder. From the CAF **Chalet de la Maline** (893m) take the red and white waymarked GR 4, which first leads slightly downhill through the Ravin (= gorge) de Charençon. After this it goes via the Pas d'Issane steeply down into the gorge with bends and steps. After 50 minutes, keep diagonally left at a junction (628m; a footbridge over the river on the right) and after a few bends reach a point about 10 metres above the river. Now follow the river upstream on its right bank; high crags line both sides of the gorge. On the opposite side of the river the Auberge des Cavaliers appears like an eagle's nest. Now it is possible on the pleasant track to enjoy the beauties of the gorge to the full. The valley widens, the Pré d'Issane, a small meadow, is passed and the lowest point is reached (558m; about 30 min). After this the Guègues scree slope has to be overcome. There is a short uphill and steep downhill section with scree and crags, partly via metal ladders, so that some care is required. Shortly after this, the Baume aux Bœufs is reached (30 min) – a sort of cave in which pre-historic cattle bones were found. The path goes up now to reach a fork in 10 minutes (633m). Stay to the left on the red and white marked Sentier Martel (right: see alternative) which winds steeply up over rock steps to a gap in the rocks: **Brèche d'Imbert** (710m; about 25 min). This is named after the engineer who opened up this passage for the walker. From here there is a fascinating view of the Verdon rushing through the gorge over 100 metres below. This height difference is overcome by means of steep, ladder-like, but solid metal steps (more than 200: a problematic section for the timid. It's the same a few metres further on with some metal brackets used for protection at a steep ledge of rock.) After a short section along the river the walk continues uphill again below the Baume aux Hirondelles to then to descend again more steeply in a double loop at the Baume aux Chiens to the river at the Plages des Fères (about 570m; 50 min). It again goes up and down, while on the opposite bank the 500 metre-high rock wall of Escalès, an Eldorado for rock-climbers, towers above. Now the delightful section of the gorge is reached where it widens. The path continues with very little change in height about 30 metres above the river, mainly through a shady wood. After a first – no longer passable – tunnel and a few metal steps there is a beautiful backward view to the twin cliffs of Trescaïre. Now go through an approximately 100 metre-long tunnel, which leads to the entrance to the **Couloir Samson**, a narrow rock passage through the cliffs. This is avoided by an almost 700 metre-long, pitch-dark tunnel, where a torch is indispensable and which is quite slippery on account of the dripping water. The descent from a tunnel window via an iron ladder to the Baume aux Pigeons cave was closed the last time. At the end of the tunnel go down over some steps to the river below (610m; nearly 2 hrs) and take a look into the



*Dizzying view down into the Gorges du Verdon.*

rugged couloir. Then cross a tributary and go up steeply over steps to a car park (sometimes taxis). At its left-hand end take the red and white marked path (GR 4), which ascends steeply to the D 952, which is followed to the left for about 150 metres to the **Auberge du Point Sublime** (783m; 50 min). From here return by taxi to the starting point of la Maline.