

## **THE PLEASURES OF PROVENCE**

BY MARY GILBERT Special to the News & Record Dec 3, 1994

A visit to Provence in France restores an appreciation of the fundamental pleasures of life.

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Peter Mayle single-handedly may have influenced more Americans to select Provence as a vacation destination than any tourism office.

In his best-selling book, "A Year In Provence," and its sequel, "Toujours Provence," the author describes with great relish the earthy delights of life in this part of southern France. Hearty cuisine, abundant vineyards, easy-going pace, centuries-old villages, temperate climate and varied geography characterize the region. Yet despite reading Mayle's works and other travel guides beforehand, a first-time visitor to Provence simply is unprepared for the intensity of the landscape.

The sky is not just blue, but azure. The breeze blowing off the Mediterranean is not softly caressing, but lustful. The sun does not merely shine, but blazes. The land seems almost undisciplined, changing from rolling, fertile plains to rugged, forest-covered hillsides to massive mountain ranges.

Many of the lowlands are cultivated and interspersed with rows of lavender, vineyards flush with grapes, olive groves and fields of towering sunflowers. The ubiquitous mas, or farmhouses, most of which are made of stone and often with terra cotta-tiled roofs, offer some semblance of conformity.

It is easy to see what has attracted artists (the Impressionists in particular), writers and, yes, tourists to the Provence countryside.

The area of the Luberon Mountains, which Mayle featured in his books, offers an especially arresting view. The valleys are punctuated with precariously perched, tiered villages on top of rocky hills. At first glance, the stone buildings seem in danger of tumbling, but then you realize that they are anchored so well into the rocks that they appear to have sprung from them, rather than been constructed on them.

Menerbes, Oppede-le-Vieux, Lacoste and Bonnieux are a few of the hill towns not to be missed for their charm and scenery, but perhaps the most picturesque of these ancient hamlets is Gordes.

The outline of Gordes is visible several miles away. The best approach to Gordes is up the curving road from nearby Cavillon because of the dramatic overlook, about a half mile from the village, which emphasizes its seemingly tenuous foothold.

A Renaissance chateau sits at the summit and dominates the village. Several rooms in the chateau house a museum of some of the mind-altering, geometric paintings of 20th-century French artist Victor Vasarely - a somewhat incongruous choice considering the

medieval surroundings. Restaurants and shops selling local products, such as herbs, lavender and colorful cotton cloth, circle the base of the chateau.

Not far from Gordes is an olive oil mill, now a museum, housing the oldest olive oil press in the Mediterranean. The seven-ton press, fashioned from a single oak tree, was in operation from the 1400s to the early 1900s. Olive oil is a staple in the provençal diet and once was used as a fuel for lamps.

Another unique hill village is Roussillon, noted for the ochre (red) cliffs surrounding it. The buildings are made of the ochre rock so they have the same reddish cast. Potters use the ochre clay as well to mold their ceramics.

Several larger cities are part of Provence. Even though they may lack some of the charm, serenity and slower tempo of the smaller towns, they are worth investigating.

Aix-en-Provence is an upscale university city. At its heart is the Cours Mirabeau, a wide, tree-lined boulevard with cafes, shops and office buildings. The avenue is similar to the Champs Elysees in Paris, but on a much smaller scale and less frenetic. Among the other sites to explore are the Cathedral Saint Sauveur, whose construction began in the 5th century, the tapestry museum and the Granet Museum of European art.

The studio, or atelier, where the Impressionist artist Paul Cezanne painted during his last seven years, overlooks a garden that inspired some of his works. The studio has been restored as it was at his death in 1906, scattered with brushes, clothing and with wine bottles, flowers, fruit and vegetables that he painted in his still lifes.

Known as the almond capital of Europe, Aix-en-Provence produces a local delicacy, the calisson, which is a sugar-topped confection of almond paste.

Aries, a former capital during the Roman occupation, has preserved a portion of its ancient outdoor theater as well as its huge amphitheater, where bullfights are still held on Sunday afternoons.

Avignon is a walled city. It is called "the other Rome" because early in the 14th century the pope broke away from Rome because of political differences and established his court in Avignon.

Altogether, seven popes ruled from this city. While there, they built the fortress-like palace of the popes, cathedral and surrounding gardens.

West of Avignon stands the monumental and well-preserved remains of the tri-level Pont du Gard, a 2,000-year-old Roman aqueduct that was once nearly 30 miles long.

Provence is steeped in its past. It projects a sense of time standing still, or at least in no hurry. However, the traditions and customs of yesterday are just as valid today.

An essential part of the commerce and culture of Provence, even with the presence of modern supermarkets, is the open-air market.

More than just a place to shop for the day's groceries, the market is a lively combination of social gathering, festival and ritual.

A market takes place somewhere in the vicinity each day, beginning early in the morning and ending generally by noon.

Some villages are known for their specialized markets, such as L'Isle-sur-la-Sorgue for antiques.

Farmers and merchants set up their individual stalls to present their wares. Luscious fruits and vegetables, cheeses, sausages, fish, herbs, lavender, olives and olive oil, wine, breads, pastries, honey, vinegar and flowers tantalize with their color and aroma.

Shoppers carry just-purchased long baguettes (bread) in their hands as nonchalantly as they would a purse or briefcase.

In addition to the food stalls, more durable goods such as clothing, jewelry, toys and art are available for sale.

Most shops and businesses close from around noon to 2:30 to allow time for lunch. Mid-day dining is an event, and it typifies the relaxed pace of Provence.

The concept of grabbing a bite on the run is contrary to the provencal lifestyle, where eating is a serious pastime deserving of considerable attention.

Patrons in restaurants and cafes expect to enjoy a leisurely meal and lengthy conversation with their companions, and the staff complies.

Some popular local dishes sure to be part of any menu include bouillabaisse (fish soup), pistou (vegetable soup laced with olive oil and garlic) and daube (beef stew).

Boules, like the Italian game bocce, is the favorite sport, and a crowd playing boules is a common sight in parks and outdoor bouledromes. The object is to toss balls weighted with iron toward a smaller ball at the end of the bowling ground. A team, composed of three or four players, may strike the balls of the opposing team to dislodge their positions. The team with the ball closest to the small ball wins.

In keeping with the unhurried pace, many tourists eschew cars for bicycles as a means of transportation. The roads are paved and well marked, and the combination of hills and flatlands guarantees a good workout.

A visit to Provence restores an appreciation of fundamental pleasures. Lingering over a simple lunch of bread, cheese, olives and wine before a breathtaking vista captures the essence of life in Provence.

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