

A WEEK IN PROVENCE

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Gordes

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Despard looks at his face again in the rear vision mirror of his taxi. ‘*Certainement!*’ he tells himself, ‘Despard for ze next production of *French Connection!* Despard, ze Alain Delon but



with ze pencil moustache! Despard ...’ While smoothing down his moustache, he sees a middle-aged man with an *Indo-Chine*-looking woman approach his taxi. ‘*Merde*, I have ze customer.’

‘Hotel Genève, Old Marseille, er, Vieux Port,’ the man says in disgracefully accented French.

Despard grunts, lowers his Alain Delon-style sunglasses, sets the meter and decides to scare the *merde* out of them. He floors it, spins the taxi round with a squeal of rubber, and rockets

out of the train station. With a *baise-toi!* here and a *merde alors!* there, several hair-raising near-misses later, they shudder to a halt outside the Hotel Genève.

As Despard showed no signs of moving from the driver’s seat, the two passengers get out to retrieve their luggage. The man approaches Despard’s window: ‘*Combien?*’ he asks.

Despard points to the meter which shows 25FF. The man hands over a 50FF note.

‘*Non, soixante!*’ Despard holds up six fingers.

‘*Soixante?*’ asks the man in amazement. He too points to the meter, which still reads 25FF.

Despard explains in a torrent of French – as would Alain Delon with similar drama and emphasis – that the meter only shows the *minimum* fare. With luggage, two passengers, it being a nice sunny day and high season, the fare is indeed a loud ‘*SOIXANTE!*’

The man, barely understanding a word, simply says, ‘No.’

‘*Voleurs! Baise-toi!*’ (thieves, fuck you) shouts Despard. Snatching the 50FF note, he floors it once again and shoots off down the street, wheels screaming, two fingers high in the air.

‘I think he was trying to say that the meter only gave a basic fare and there were extras,’ the man explains to his companion. ‘But serve him right. He drove like a crim on the run. He certainly looked like one.’

Little do they know that, on rounding the corner, Despard is chuckling as he turns the meter to zero and places the 50FF in his wallet.

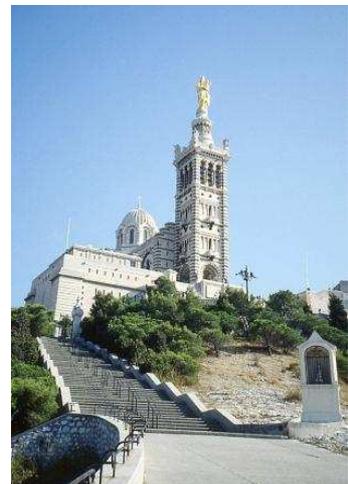
You see, while writing this, I thought I’d check something. Google has just told me that all Marseille taxis have a meter that records the exact fare, but a small tip on top of that is

appreciated. Our would-be Alain Delon (a French film idol who played crooks) had ripped a 60 per cent tip from us with his histrionics.

It is 1993, a couple of years before I retire from Hong Kong University. I learn that the European Association for Research in Learning and Instruction (EARLI) conference is to be held in Aix-en-Provence. Provence? Where Peter Mayle spent a year? Conferences rarely come better than that. Better still, Catherine and I agree, will be the week of touring Provence afterwards.

Hotels certainly did come better than the Genève but never mind, it's in the heart of Old Marseille, on the waterfront. The immediate and continuing sensation is the brilliance of the light, the dazzling colours, ships with their various flags, the azure of the sky, the deeper blue of the sea. A gift, so I thought, for my Ektachrome Professional film but alas my Nikon consistently underexposed, I later discover, and the colours weren't quite right, whereas Catherine usually got perfectly exposed shots on her idiot-proof automatic, with ordinary Kodachrome. But time and Hong Kong's humidity have taken their toll on both our sets of images. I have yet to discover Fuji Velvia, but even that is no match for today's digital.

Marseille collects people from all over, and especially from Africa although why so many Algerians live there after what the French did to Algeria is a bit of a mystery. At all events, there is a carnival atmosphere: crowds, markets, boat rides. The harbour is chock full of boats, including a splendid three masted barque, spilling a brilliant flag. The Virgin Mary keeps a kindly watch over the carnival on top of the steeple of Notre Dame de La Garde. Her brilliant gold statue and ball tower radiate a gold light from dawn to sunset. Notre Dame is a short climb from the Harbour, via narrow winding streets. The view from the Church tower is stupendous.



Quirky French humour. A family are playing with their poodle in a park. The poodle wears spectacles. They throw a ball for it to catch; the ball has a tobacco pipe attached. When the dog catches the ball, *voilà*: a learned, pipe smoking poodle! Shops display a *pastis* pourer in the shape of an erect penis. Pastis – Pernod is the best known – becomes cloudy when water is added. Pour yourself an aperitif with a smidgin of water, and *voilà*: a glass of, er, Well, let me put it this. I used to like my pernod, but somehow I have now lost my taste for it.

Dinner has to be Marseille's signature dish: *bouillabaisse*. From 6 pm onwards restaurants put out their boards advertising *bouillabaisse* as their speciality. Our hotel advises that the Miramar restaurant serves the best *bouillabaisse* in Marseille. I don't know if it is the best, we don't try the others, but it certainly is the most expensive we saw at 250FF (\$60). But it's not every day you are in Marseille to eat *bouillabaisse*. Our obliging waiter describes in English the seven kinds of fish that must go into authentic *bouillabaisse* – contrary to myth, all the

French we meet are happy to speak English – apart from Despard, I have to say. Our waiter brings an enormous pile of fish, stock and *rouille*, a chili-garlic mayonnaise like *aoili* but hot, to be spread on the round croutons of bread. On a table next to our own he prepares the soup, telling us what he is doing as he adds fish to the slowly heaving fish stock in a large pot. I doubt we managed half, there was so much. He recommends a bottle of Cassis, a white made of six different varieties of grape, traditional with *bouillabaisse*. Wine writer Oz Clarke describes Cassis as arguably the most over-rated and over-priced wine in France. He could be right.

Next morning, we take a boat to Chateau d’If, at one time France’s version of Alcatraz: a huge fortress, later a prison, on a tiny island a mile off the coast. Alexandre Dumas used it as the Count of Monte Cristo’s castle, but we don’t have time to inspect it as we are off to Aix and the conference this afternoon.

Aix is a short bus trip away. A lucky guess gets us off the bus near Les Floridianes, our hotel. Our room turns out to be a beautifully equipped suite, well worth the 400FF (\$100) per night. We attend the conference at the Université where we discover that the programme



committee has a welcome if rather strange policy for a conference: there are tours every day, competing with the conference programme itself! So we sign up for most. It turns out the tours are for ‘accompanying persons’, not for conferees. Never mind, we are accompanying each other, and the programme isn’t that good.

That evening we go on a guided walking tour of Aix, which we abort halfway through when we meet up with old friends from Newcastle. We go to La Bacchanale, a restaurant that advertises a gourmet menu at 174FF (\$45) a head, astounding value by Hong Kong and given the quality, even by Australian standards. The food is excellent: fish soup, rabbit, cheese, dessert; a Cassis the others insist on, despite my warnings, but a truly marvellous Cote du Rhone, full and mellow, and a slightly rougher Gigondas. These wines are closest to our shirazes, especially when cut with grenache, but they are more savoury, aromatic and don’t bang your skull with too much alcohol. Unfortunately an egregious American joins our party and takes over the conversation, which rather spoils our reunion.

Next day, we show willing at the Conference, but are rather put off by several intense little groups sitting around, discussing earnestly the finer point of this and that. Guilt persuades us to join in at first, but I sense disapproval re me and Catherine, who is now my wife but wasn’t then. We decide there’s more to a week in Provence than academic and moral nitpicking, so the tours for accompanying persons it is.



All the tours are fantastic, the village names a roll call of Rhone wines, slabs of text from Peter Mayle's *A Year in Provence* jump to mind, but the real thing far exceeds the picture Mayle had created in my mind's eye – and I'm sorry to say it much exceeds the pictures seen in my camera's eye. We go north towards the Durance River and the Luberon Mountains. The first stop is an old Norman Abbey at Silvacane, then to Lourmarin Castle now an artists'



centre, with olive groves and a garden, where the guide tries to explain the difference between *lavande* and *lavandes*: one you may eat as a herb, one you make perfume out of, but I never got which was which. Lunch at a rural restaurant, then to a magnificent castle at Ansous, where the Duc de Sabron and his family have lived for the last ten centuries.

We bus through Salon de Provence, where the footprint of Rome is clear: Arles has a splendid Roman amphitheatre, St. Remy is famous for a Roman triumphal arch. A more modern claim to fame is the



ex-lunatic asylum, St. Paul-de-Mausole, which for one year had Van Gogh as a compulsory guest. St. Paul's – or the other guests – must have inspired him, however, for



he painted 150 paintings in that year; the garden is still adorned with his work. A few kilometres further is *Le*

Cathédrale des Images, in the hills above St Remy. Old sandstone workings have left huge underground areas that are now used to project Green images, animals, forests, in total darkness. It was set up by a millionaire and proceeds used for third world causes.



Just up the mountain further, past some strange rock formations, an even greater spectacle: Les Baux, a fortified village on top of a sheer rock, once the scene of much violence, now a peaceful and utterly spectacular multi-levelled village on a huge rock, tiny winding streets take you to the splendid views from a parapet, and to very expensive hotels and restaurants. Les Baux is one of many places we vow we must return to.

That night sees another bout of gluttony at an Aix restaurant: a rich fish soup, a Provencale specialty, and another speciality (there are so many in Provence!), a beef *daube* with tomato *coulis*, a dessert that I forget as I tend to with desserts. We have a Bandol red, Ch. Pontiduvol '82, which we all took for shiraz, but the bottle says it is mourvèdre, a grape that in Australia produces an ordinary rough red used mainly for blending. Then to a late concert in the lovely

old church of St Charles, given by local musicians: mostly French renaissance, with some modern works.

Saturday is our contribution to the conference, so we are good children and do not go on the tour to Cassis, the home of the over-priced white wine. But that's all right, as we go there on our own later.

The Conference dinner is held in the Camargues wetlands, the non-wet parts of which are used to run horses and bulls. We visit a farm, go on a hay-ride, see a demonstration of horsemanship and civilised bullfighting. The aim is merely to annoy the bull; the lad of the house was not quick enough and got a painful bruise on his leg from a padded horn. Our hosts then give us a concert of folk singing, Camargues style with wine and garlic-and-herbed black olives to nibble, then we go to a large barn sit down to a superb beef *daube*, the equal of the one we had the previous night. How do they do *daube* like that? It must be like the *gout de terroir* of wine, a chemical miracle of place. Another chemical miracle happens when the *vin de pays* runs out but *pas une problème*, our host raids his cellar to keep us happy.



Conference over, we rent a Ford Fiesta for a week of touring. I'd seen some incredible colour slides of a place called Annecy, one of the wonders of France. So instead of touring around Provence for all the remaining time, as originally intended, we decide to go to Annecy on the Swiss border, over-nighting on the way. A mistake, as it turns out.

We steer the Ford east towards Nice, then turn north at Brignoles to pass through a village called Cotignac, which the guide book said was very pretty. Our photo is pleasant, but not a patch on other villages we see. Approaching the Lac de Sainte Croix, huge yellow biplanes float slowly over the road. A flying school? The Chinese Air Force? One of those French surprises. We creep along the rim of the Canyons of Verdon to Trigance, another old Les Baux-like fort, now a luxury hotel but unfortunately a booked-out one.

It is late afternoon and we need accommodation. We drive on to Castellane. Overlooking the village square is a huge cliff, at the top of which is a small church and a statue of Mary, blessing the town. Around the town square are numerous hotels, all but one of which are booked out. Mary's blessings include these two sinners but it is a close call; we get the last room in a nice old hotel and the last



place at dinner. I score a perfect *coq au vin*, which I have tried many times to emulate but don't quite get the sauce right (something to do with vinegar I think), and an equally uncopyable rabbit stew for Catherine. Three courses of great French country food for 68FF (\$17) per head!

Mary's blessing have run their course. We head North through fog and drizzle via Digne, le Lauzet, Embrun, Briançon; places whose names have been cut adrift from my memories of them. In these digital days we just bang away, which is great for nudging aging memories. Between Briançon and St Michel we ascend over 3000 metres in thick fog, so thick I have to drive in low, head stuck out the window. Uncomfortable but not as uncomfortable as it must be for a group of cyclists who loom through the mist; we pass with extreme care. Most of the time we can see only to the edge of the road, but through a thinning of the mist we catch a glimpse of a canyon as awesome as the Canyon de Verdon.

Although it is still France, the character of the countryside and of the houses changes from French to Swiss, as the houses adorned with elaborate wooden balconies and flowerboxes tell us. The remaining journey to Annecy is flat, it is raining, and a large lake looms through the murk. We arrive around 6 pm in pouring rain and head straight to Tourist Information for a hotel for the night. In Annecy Mary deserts us entirely; we end up in a house that attempts to cram people in wherever possible; our room is wall-to-wall bed.



We decide Annecy has had too much of a build-up. Maybe it is the weather. We tour, wet and on foot. Yes, Annecy is beautiful, with unique features like the old triangular castle like a huge stone boat slicing down the moat; lovely old streets, restaurants fronted by huge boxes of flowers line up along the main canal in the old part of the town.

We have dinner in a canal-side restaurant. The waiter doesn't understand English but his father does, and better still, he's the chef. He talks to us about the menu and Savoyard food in general, which like the architecture seems indistinguishable from Swiss. We pass on fondue, but follow his advice on both food and wine: a local fish, a gratin made of garlic cream and cheese, a veal main course; and here I do remember dessert, a very light and tasty cassis sorbet with marc. A very pleasant green white wine, the red light bodied, also like Swiss wine. We appreciate the food and the time the chef spent with us, so much so that it feels rude to tip, like tipping your host. Would he have seen it as rude? But it blows another myth; I never felt pressure to tip in France, just as in Australia, but very unlike the messages waiters send in Hong Kong.

Was Annecy worth foregoing Provence? We decide not. We hit the freeway to Aix-les-Bains and down to Chambéry, home of the best dry vermouth in France. In Canada years ago, I used to drink Chambéry, very light and flowery compared to oily Noilly Prat that reeks of amyl

acetate. Incredibly, no shop in Chambery is selling its child. I find a sweet Chambery vermouth in a village down the track; I don't particularly like sweet vermouth but I bought it, for old time's sake. By this stage we have left the *faux* Switzerland behind: here is gorgeous lush scenery, little villages, some stately homes, sheer green clad mountains – what I'd expect of rural France. But no time for photos; we must push on. Through Voiron, a large very attractive town, then to Valance, which is on the main autoroute, A7. Autoroutes are the same anywhere and we are distinctly unimpressed. Tain-l'Hermitage, home to the greatest shirazes in the world, was 20 kms north of Valence. But our aim is to proceed to Provence with all haste. By Montelimar, we are very irritable we do not like watching speeding cars on a freeway. I decide to get out at the next Eastern outlet, destination Carpentras, which appears to be an ideal base for the next few days.



The next few miles are rolling countryside, words familiar from wine bottles roll past: Coteaux de Tricastin, Cote du Rhone, Cotes du Rhone Villages. Rounding a corner, a *coup d'oeuil!* A huge castle, poised on a cliff, rises up from the beautiful village of Grignan. The shock of finding such a magical transformation is quite overwhelming. This is what we have come from Hong Kong to see! Unfortunately, the French are quite blasé about the beauty of their country; they have little time for

tourists who park the cars in narrow roads to take photographs. Loud blasts of horns deliver an imperative: *Don't get in my way, drive on!*

Stunningly pretty villages and towns, with a central square flanked on three sides with cafes and drinkers, float past: Valreas, Nyons, Vaison-la-Romaine, then our destination, Carpentras. The guidebook strongly recommends the Fiacre Hotel. Yes, there is a room. A room with a view: a lovely balcony overlooking neighbouring houses, a scene worthy of framing. It also overlooks a courtyard that has tables and chairs by day and cars by night. The porter has the tricky job of queuing the cars to be retrievable in the right order for the next day.



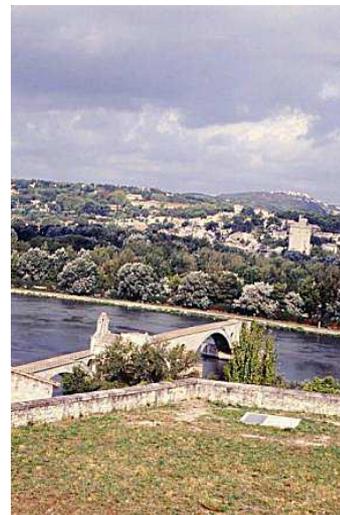
Carpentras is an excellent example of how the French have solved the problem of retaining a priceless heritage in a world of too many people and too many cars. They have built a massive circular road around the old town, into which one can only enter by foot, with plenty of bays by the entrance gates to park those pesky monstrosities. We park our monstrosity and walk through the town. Churches, shops selling elaborate sweets and chocolates, old narrow streets onto which ancient front doors open and people replay the lives and scenes of their ancestors, markets selling dew-fresh locally grown vegetables, a

dopy cat snoozing while pigeons peck unconcerned a metre away. But is that cat bluffing?

Avignon became the seat of the papacy in 1308 in an unseemly row that split the Catholic Church for seventy years, during which time seven popes ruled from the Holy See in Avignon. The papal palace and associated courtrooms, cathedral and chapels are a splendid monument and a major tourist destination. There is also of course the famous Pont d'Avignon upon which one is supposed to dance: '*Sur le pont, d'Avignon, l'y one danse ...*' Actually the original was *Sous le pont*: under the bridge, not on it. Today, or rather tonight, couples will carry on the tradition of dancing under the bridge. On their backs.

All these tourist attractions make me paranoid about parking. Unnecessary: we go straight into the Palace car park, where the Fiesta develops an itchy back door and decides it should be scratched by a friendly gatepost. Fortunately, I am able to buy a paint-pen of exactly the right shade, so that little misadventure goes unnoticed when I return the car in a frenzied rush as related below.

Clement V, first of the Avignon popes, had a taste for a good drop, his successor John XXII even more so. John encouraged a sophisticated approach to viticulture. On a stony hill overlooking the Rhone only a few kilometres away, a powerful red was made, so good it became known as *le Vin-du-Pape*: the Pope's wine. In time, the area became Chateauneuf-du-pape. The wine now is made of up to 13 different varieties, including shiraz, and some white grapes. The grapes are grown on a stony hill, the stones soak up heat during the day and release it caringly during the night, thereby achieving a slow-cooked miracle – albeit a variable one.



Our guidebook tells me one can visit cellars and taste, much as one does in Australia. Not quite true, as it turns out. The expectation is that if one likes the wine, one will buy – by the dozen, which is very difficult for passing tourists. We see the sign *DÉGUSTATION* frequently. I try an oldish looking place, where there is a nice old guy and his wife. I taste. It is okay, but not the smoothly muscular Chateauneuf du Pape I've had previously, in its distinctive distorted squat bottle. But I buy a bottle for good will.

'Une *bouteille*?' the vigneron asks incredulously.

'*Oui, je vole.*' Not sure if that is 'steal' or 'fly', I flap my arms to clarify the distinction. Smiles all round. *Pas une problème.*

But it is a *problème* shortly afterwards. On the main street, another sign invites *dégustation*. I am interested in degustating the rarer white of the region. I enter, and there it is, on the counter, at 100FF a bottle and upwards (only \$25, after all). I express interest. Behind the counter is a trendy looking guy with expensive jewelled neck pendant dangling over his hairy chest. He asks the inevitable in good English:

‘How many do you want buy?’

‘Well, we’re travelling and have a weight problem on the plane. Maybe a bottle or two.’
He looks at me coldly. ‘Do you think we do this for a joke?’

I debate whether to inform him of Australian customs on this matter of *dégustation*, and how we at least conduct matters with *politesse*, but decide I would be wasting my time. We leave, to have a light lunch and a glass of white Chateauneuf du Pape, which is indeed a pleasant drop. Just the thing to wash a nasty taste out of one’s mouth. We visit the remains of a chateau overlooking the village; it was bombed by the Germans during WW2.



A few kms to the north is Orange, with its almost intact Roman theatre still used for productions. The theatre is in magnificent condition, even better than most for there is a wine sale inside: 3 bottles for 70FF (\$18); one is a Gigondas, said rival to Chateauneuf du Pape itself in its power and character. Which reminds me that the town of Gigondas is not far away. *Alors, à Gigondas!*

Here I learn how one should seriously degustate: go to the Cooperative not to individual wineries. The Co-op has all the information you need, tastings, and no barrow to push. Unfortunately, BYO is not part of the French scene, and as bottles are heavy to take on a plane, the amount tourists can buy and suitably dispose of is limited. I taste a few but I am disappointed. I learn that the particular winery and bottler are an all important combination. To buy French wine even at a Co-op requires a very detailed knowledge of the local region. Returning from Gigondas, I try to stop to photograph *Les Dentelles du Ventoux*, spiky peaks that dominate the countryside, but the old French problem again: narrow roads with irate drivers leaning on their horns.

Two days to go before we have to return. We do a circular tour in the Lubérons – Peter Mayle country. The Fountains of Vaucluse are very lush with lovely colours of draping bright green weeds in the flowing waters, restaurants overlooking the river. Menerbes, Mayle’s town, was nothing like my mental picture: considerably better in fact. A succession of villages on the hill: Bonnieux, Rousillon built on red cliffs, and the incredible Gordes, a stunning view from the road. Here I did stop to photograph.

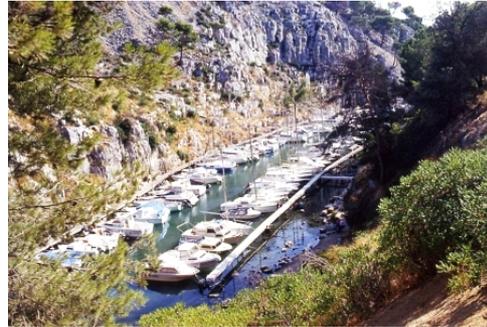


South of Gordes are the stone *bories*: igloos made of stone to withstand

Mistral – a powerful cold wind that hurls through Provence particularly during winter.



Our final night in Provence. We decide to go to Cassis, the conference tour we virtuously missed. Cassis is due south, and from there we should – *should* – have plenty of time to catch our midday flight at Marignane, Marseille’s airport. We arrive in La Ciotat, after serial incidents of driver rudeness, at lunchtime, and then drive via a stunning coastal route to Cassis. We scurry around to find a hotel, which we eventually do find but the desk is manned by experts at a certain French mode of dealing with foreigners, à *la* Chateauneuf. Fuming but relieved that accommodation has been secured, we have just enough time to visit Les Calanques, a series of miniature fjords along the coast where millionaires park their luxury yachts.



Cassis is indeed a millionaire’s playground. Like the Cassis wine we sampled on our first night in Marseille, Cassis the town too is hugely over-

priced. And here we are, on our last night in France, having dinner in Cassis at an outdoor restaurant. We watch a brilliant sunset and brilliant people, as they stroll past in their designer



shorts and sandals and expensive, chunky jewellery. I am reminded of an incident on the way here just after Le Ciotat. A man in a business suit stepped out of his Audi sports job and, standing by the roadside, he urinated with French elegance. Now why does that remind me of Cassis?

There is an autoroute from Cassis to Marignane, but the Coast Road looks more interesting and we have plenty of time, some four hours for only about 100 km. I make a

stomach- churning, heart-pounding mistake. True, the scenery is great, but there is a major road hold-up and we are running terrifyingly late. I backtrack to rejoin the autoroute at the first possible opportunity and hurl towards Marignane, where I have to return the car and we have to check in for our flight. I dash inside the rental place with a quick-hurry-we-got-a-plane-to-catch as we finalise the paperwork.

Made it. And they didn’t notice my handy work with the paint pencil.