





PASTORAL PAINTING

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY ROGER WEATHERBURN BAKER

The French countryside lures art lovers to St. Paul de Vence, a crossroads of culture since the Middle Ages.

It is a spectacular tangle of medieval dwellings and cobbled passages immured behind massive 13th-century ramparts. From its lofty perch on a spur in the craggy foothills of the Maritime Alps, St. Paul de Vence offers stunning views across cypress-studded valleys toward the distant Mediterranean and the azure shores of Le Cap d'Antibes.

No wonder artists and artisans — and now art lovers — have been attracted to this magical town since the Middle Ages.

Some of the greatest names in 20th-century art followed in the footsteps of the humble weavers and carvers who populated St. Paul de Vence those many

At fresco dining on the terrace of the 16th-century Hotel Le St. Paul on the Rue Grande, once a private residence, offers stunning views across a valley of cypress trees. The public eatery, with priority seating for hotel guests, creates the perfect setting for a sunny breakfast or a romantic, candlelit dinner.

years ago. They first came in the 1920s — a cadre of avant-garde artists with a common passion for expanding their creativity into realms few others appreciated in that era. Drawn from their studios in the surrounding countryside, the artists were attracted not by St. Paul's history or its panoramic views, but by a cool, shady inn built on a rocky outcrop just outside the village walls. There they would meet, eat, drink and perhaps play a



AT A GLANCE

GETTING THERE: Continental (800-231-0856 or continental.com) and Delta (800-241-4141 or delta.com) have connecting flights from Tampa to Nice for about \$800 this time of year.

WHEN TO GO: Tourists are constant in St. Paul de Vence, but summers and holidays are especially busy.

WHAT TO SEE: La Colombe d'Or (www.la-colombe-dor.com), a hotel and restaurant filled with 20th-century masterworks; the Fondation Maeght (fondation-maeght.com) a museum opened in 1946 to display even more 20th-century masterworks; and the St.

Paul Town Cemetery, where artist Marc Chagall is buried.

NEARBY DESTINATIONS: Nice (11 miles east), Cap d'Antibes (12 miles south), Cannes (25 miles southwest) and Monaco (20 miles northeast).

INFORMATION: Office of Tourism, (33) 4 93 58 06 38 or ville-vence.fr



A mosaic by French cubist Fernand Léger (above) graces an ivy-covered wall on the dining terrace at La Colombe d'Or. Another popular attraction is Marc Chagall's grave in the St. Paul Town Cemetery (bottom). Built on an outcropping, it offers panoramic views across the lush valley. Opposite page: A fresco dining on the Cote d'Azur is a highlight of Le Metropole Hotel at Beaulieu-sur-Mer (left), near St. Paul de Vence.

form of *boules*, known locally as *pétanque*, in the elm-shaded outdoor square.

Innkeeper Bernard Roux heartily welcomed and encouraged the starving artists, willingly accepting their art in exchange for food, wine and lodging. It may be the smartest thing he ever did. In addition to making him a very wealthy man, it sparked a revival for his village.

Among the first artists to pay their way in-kind at the inn were Paul Signac, Marc Chagall, Chaim Soutine, Pierre Bonnard and Amedeo Modigliani. Among the many that followed were Joan Miró, Henri Matisse, Raoul Dufy and Pablo Picasso. Within a mere few years, the Roux family had found themselves the sole owners of one of the world's finest private collections of 20th-century art.

Today, the old inn is an internationally renowned hotel and restaurant, La Colombe d'Or. Inside, there are enough 20th-century masterworks not only to fill a small museum, but to decorate almost every available space of it. Some are large, impressive and of unmistakable

origin. Other works are little more than a doodle on a scrap of paper pinned to a corridor wall.

Outside are works as big as the stature of the artists who created them. A huge mosaic by French cubist Fernand Léger is built into an ivy-clad wall of the summer dining terrace. Another mosaic of a dove by French fauvist Georges Braque is installed in a wall fringing the swimming pool, one end of which is overhung by a mobile created by American kinetic artist Alexander Calder, a work as tall as the cedar trees that flank it.

Through the years, the eye-popping collection has attracted an impressive list of Hollywood celebrity guests that has included Greta Garbo, Sophia Loren, Yul Brynner, Burt Lancaster, Yves Montand, David Niven, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Roger Moore, Tony Curtis and more. And they keep coming. Last July, Michael Caine swung by on his vacation.

Outside the village is the Fondation Maeght, a gem overshadowed by the glare of its celebrity-associated rival inn



Just a short stroll from La Colombe d'Or, the sun-dappled, elm-shaded square outside the Cafe de la Place (above) is where Marc Chagall and friends used to play *pétanque*, still a popular pastime among locals and visitors today. Among the simple pleasures of enchanting St. Paul de Vence is discovering hidden art galleries and ateliers in the maze of narrow, winding alleyways (right).

and restaurant. This world-renowned museum opened in 1946 to display an even more extensive and impressive collection of 20th-century paintings, sculpture and ceramics, many by the same artists, but largely donated or acquired from a variety of private collections.

Both destinations helped put St. Paul on the map with artists and collectors alike. Today, dozens of studios fill the little village, and more than 70 fine art galleries attract an average of 7,000 visitors a day.

Main Street is the Rue Grande, although it is hardly grand by today's standards. The narrow, cobbled passageway is little more than the width of a hand-drawn cart in some places. Underfoot, the cobbles are laid out in decorative designs, from complex floral still-lives to abstract swirls resembling clouds. The little street snakes through the village from one side to the other, rising and falling, twisting and turning.

Like a medieval mall, the street is lined with tiny shops, some sweetly scented with lavender. There you'll find everything from regional herbs, olives and oils to fabrics, linens and bags in distinctive Provençal patterns. But these shops are mere diversions, outnumbered by the legion of galleries that sell what most tourists come to buy: art.

Some of the upscale, spacious and well-appointed galleries exhibit paintings and sculptures, along with attitudes and prices inflated enough to give even the fattest wallet a hernia. The more affordable and unusual art can be found in the quainter artist-owned showrooms tucked away in slivers of space little more than a doorway wide. One, called Le Garage, is nestled in a single room. Another houses tiny miniatures of famous French

shops, cafes and restaurants crafted from Limoges porcelain. Yet another displays sculptures whose abstract shapes cast shadows resembling a violin, a flower, a nude.

While St. Paul attracted the likes of Chagall, who is buried in the village cemetery, its surrounding communities lured others to the region. Picasso spent most of his life in Provence, living in nearby Mougins, another picturesque mountain village now peppered with galleries and studios. In 1946, he was lent space for a studio in the Château Grimaldi down the road in Antibes. During the six months he worked there, he created more than 70 drawings and paintings, which he donated to the city at the end of his stay. Those works form the nucleus of the Picasso Museum, which also displays the art of Miró, Léger, Max Ernst and Nicolas de Staël.

Just a brush stroke away from St. Paul lies the town of Cagnes-sur-Mer, home of Les Collettes, the wonderfully tranquil retreat where Auguste Renoir lived. Today, it is a museum that displays a few of his original paintings, drawings and sketches. In a small studio, his easel, paints, brushes and palette are poised as if awaiting his return.

Art lovers should continue on to Nice, where a museum is dedicated to the life and works of Henri Matisse, who lived nearby in the Hotel Regina, and to ascent to the galleries and studios above the mountain village of Eze, just outside Monte Carlo — a trip permitted only on foot or by mule.

Pinpointing all of the art destinations in Provence would resemble a pointillist painting, though none rivals St. Paul — a veritable mountain of art where so many giants' paths have crossed, creating a legacy that still thrives a century later. □



DA
CAVANNA

ATELIER
DECAY

JOËL DURAND
Chocolatier

HOTEL
RESTAURANT
Le Saint-Paul
★★★★★
Terrasse

HOTEL
Le Saint-Paul
★★★★★

GALERIE
VIT JD

GALERIE
VIT JD

FILIE
VIT JD