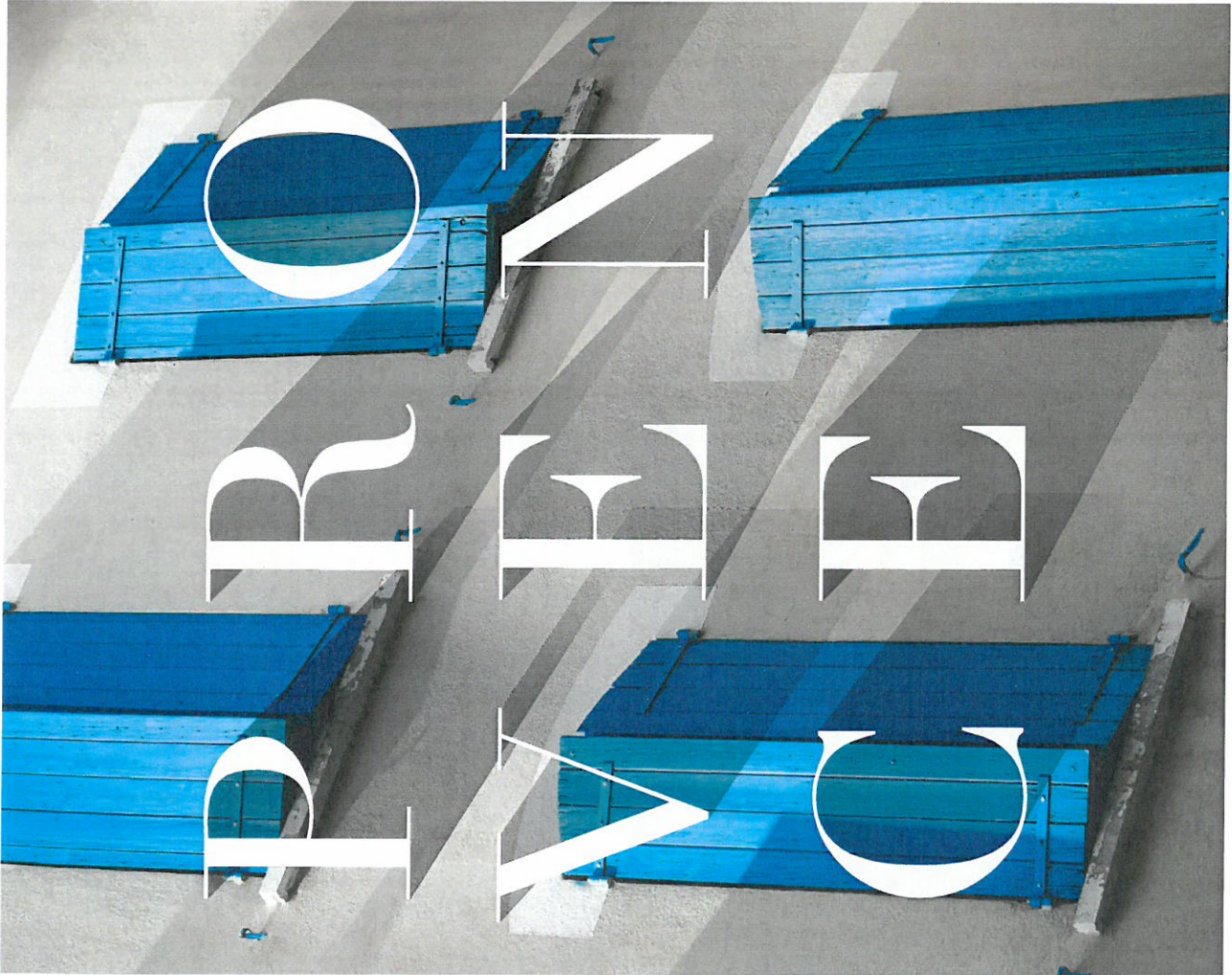


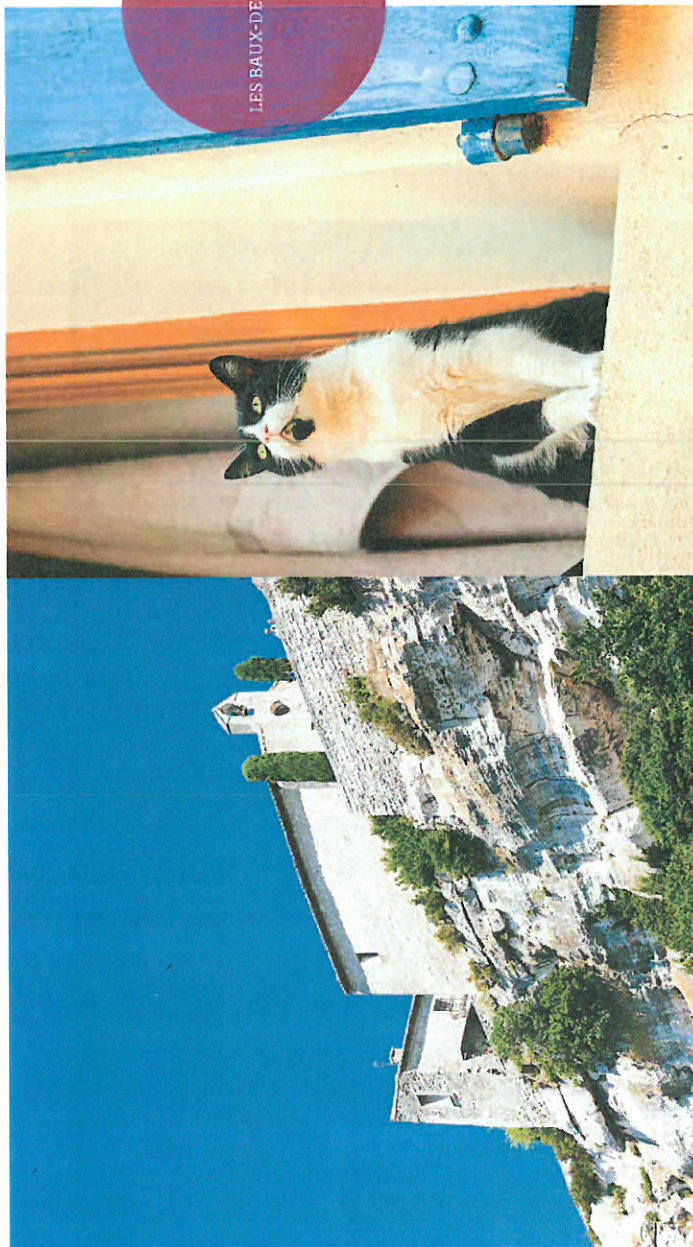
ROAD TRIPPING PROVENCE



My love affair with France first began at the tender age of 17, when I found myself in Paris as part of an immersive high school study abroad trip. I'd sold my parents on the idea, claiming that it was a great educational opportunity, a chance to learn French and pick up a few easy school credits along the way.

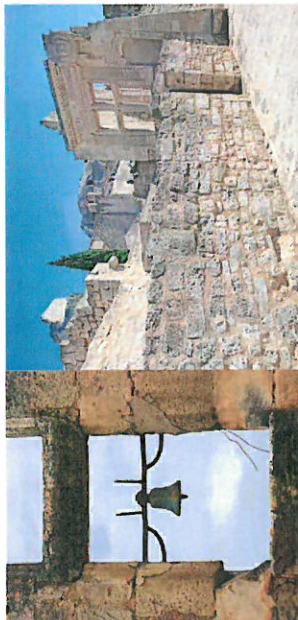
WRITTEN BY
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LES BAUX-DE-PROVENCE

TOP RIGHT
 Located on a rocky plateau in the heart of the Alpilles, Les Baux-de-Provence has been partially restored and now boasts a historical heritage consisting of 22 listed buildings.



with smells of sweet apricot, salted caramel and Nutella wafting in the air.

Next spot on the tourist hit list was Carrières de Lumières. This unique multimedia art show in the old quarry projects images of famous Renaissance art onto walls and pillars carved out of the mountain. There's nothing quite like seeing the master works of Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo and Raphael towering high on slabs of rock.

Having worked up an appetite sightseeing, I ventured downhill, along the steep streets to L'Oustau de Baumanière, a 5-star luxury hotel located at the foot of the village of Les Baux-de-Provence. The goal? Lunch. Although what I ended up experiencing was more of a life-changing gastronomic experience.

Nestled in a valley among jagged rocks and cypress trees as tall as Corinthian columns, L'Oustau de Baumanière is a hotel with some 30 suites, a spa and a two-Michelin-star fine dining restaurant known for serving up some of the best food in the region. Family owned for the past 70 years, L'Oustau de Baumanière has seen some very famous guests over the years, from the likes of Queen Elizabeth, to Bono, Hugh Grant and Johnny Depp. But on this particular day, it was just little 'ol' me. Tummy grumbling on the hunt for tasty treats, I'd found myself at the historic Baumanière not knowing what to expect.

My menu favorites included: the Mediterranean red mullet with sun-dried tomato confit, fresh farmhouse goat cheese, fish jus scented with savory; the "Chair de Dorneur," a King crab dish with raw beef, sheep farmhouse yogurt

LES BAUX-DE-PROVENCE

Set against a backdrop of the Alpilles mountain range, the medieval town of Les Baux-de-Provence has a rich history dating back some 11 centuries.

Strolling through the maze-like cobblestone streets of this fortified city, visitors will find outstanding relics of medieval and Renaissance architecture. One key historic spot to visit is Château des Baux, a cliff-top castle teetering on a limestone outcrop. Joining a guided tour of the site gives you a glimpse into medieval life, everything from the era's social hierarchy to the weapons and defense structures. At Château des Baux, you can walk among crumbling towers, climb ruins, descend into dungeons and wield plastic swords found in the gift shop. Beyond the history lesson, this spot also guarantees sweeping panorama views over the vineyards and olive trees of the southern plains.

At every turn, the rocky vertical village of Les Baux-de-Provence oozes charm. Steps are lined with terracotta pots and bright red flowers; fragrant bouquets of freshly cut lavender decorate window sills; local mougat vendors sell their artisanal treats alfresco

Like any good tourist, I'd done my homework before my trip. I studied Van Gogh's sunflowers, researched Chateaufeu du Pape wine tours and read *A Year in Provence*, Peter Mayle's amusing tale of a bumbling expat fumbling his way through France. I'd planned to drive from the vineyards of Avignon to the lavender farms of Sault, from Tourrettes, a perched village overlooking the Alps and Gourdon, a town with sweeping vistas directly above the Loup River that served as a backdrop for Hitchcock's 1955, *To Catch a Thief*.

While the "Super Tourist" in me wanted to see it all, I quickly realized that my cram-it-all-in-wham-bam itinerary was more suffocating than satisfying. Speeding through the South of France was akin to rushing through a 10-course Michelin-starred meal. True enjoyment, required a languid pace, giving oneself time to experience, relish and reflect. I vowed to give up on my carefully planned itinerary, let loose and embrace a "French Slow" lifestyle. These are a few of the highlights I experienced.

What this impressionable young lady experienced that month went beyond classroom textbooks, history lessons and grammar drills about the passé composé. Paris was intoxicating; the city a sensory overload of culture and history. There was an undeniable romance to every parkette, cemetery and public café.

Now as a well-traveled, discerning adult, having gone back to France several times since those early teenage years, I am still utterly smitten by her indefatigable charm.

On my most recent trip to France, I opted to break out of the Paris parameters and head out on an iconic road trip through the rolling fields of Provence. A scenic region in the southeast, the classic French countryside of Provence boasts sleepy villages, Roman ruins, unparalleled wine tasting, spectacular dining and a rich history of inspiring artists like Cézanne, Picasso and Gauguin. From Cannes, the Mediterranean mecca for moviemakers, to the markets of Marseille, to Saint Rémy de Provence (where Van Gogh painted one of his most famous paintings, *The Starry Night*), there's no shortage of celebrated places to visit.



AVIGNON

RIGHT

(From the top) the Pont Saint-Bénézet (aka Pont d'Avignon), a UNESCO world heritage site; European Capital of Culture in 2000. Avignon offers numerous possibilities for sightseeing, activities and events; the Palais des Papes, a UNESCO world heritage site.

AVIGNON

Next, a visit to the medieval walled city of Avignon on the south bank of the Rhone River.

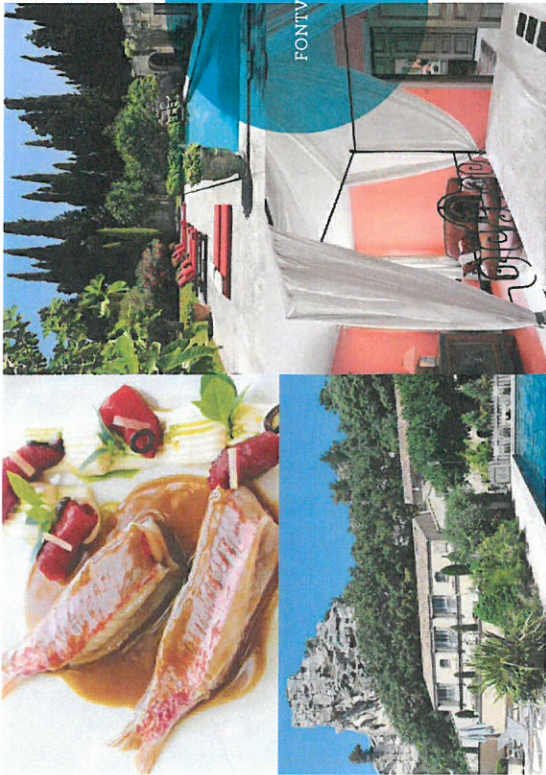
My days were spent visiting the 14th century Gothic-style Palais des Papes, browsing bookshops along Rue des Teinturiers, sampling treats from the vendors at the covered food market Les Halles, drinking lattes at one of the many bustling cafe terraces.

Walking along the old winding streets within the protective walls, I kept an eye open for one of the many trompe-l'œil (an optical illusion art technique) frescoes that decorate building facades. For hardcore art lovers, Avignon has a wide selection of museums and galleries with renown collections, among them: The Angladon Museum showcasing world-famous artists including Cezanne, Picasso, and Vincent Van Gogh; The Calvet Museum, set in an 18th-century mansion specializing in French Baroque art; The Petit Palais, devoted to Italian painting and Avignon art from the Middle Ages and The Collection Lambert, a contemporary art museum.

After a full day of sightseeing, I found refuge at Le Prieuré a charming boutique hotel in Villeneuve-lez-Avignon. This former 14th-century priory turned luxury Relais & Chateaux property boasts some 25 rooms and 13 suites, a walled garden with fragrant wisteria and terraces overlooking a swimming pool. Their award-winning restaurant serves up mouthwatering cuisine with regional dishes such as duck foie gras with Gariguetta strawberries and pot-roasted Costières wood pigeon with fresh sage. Le Prieuré is a lovely hotel choice for those travelers who are looking for refined, elegant service in casual garden setting.

With so many cities to experience, I'm sad to confess I couldn't do it all. I learned that a road trip in the fast lane doesn't allow for you to stop and smell the lavender. A successful journey through Provence means embracing the "French Slow" lifestyle, leaving time to soak up the charm, culture and ubiquitous romance that wafts across the countryside.

Photo courtesy of Anglo French Properties Ltd. (www.anglofrenchproperties.com)



FONTVIEILLE

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FONTVIEILLE

Located in the heart of Van Gough country, just outside the charming Provencal village of Fontvieille, the private estate of "Moulin de la Tour" gives travelers the chance to dabble in the lifestyles of the rich, French and fabulous. This vacation rental property is available for bookings of one week or more through Anglo French Properties, a UK-based company specializing in villas and country houses in France. A former 18th century olive mill, Moulin is a magical place set across 11 acres of grounds, with a main house that sleeps 18, a large pool, tennis court and games room. It's a truly epic space, with sprawling manicured lawns and an inviting turquoise pool framed by rose bushes, but it's the inside design that really wows. Rooms are packed with antiques and curios, a lifetime's worth of collectibles, chandeliers, busts and statues. The billiards room has a Spanish matador theme. Walls are ornately decorated with authentic bullfighting pieces, vintage posters, rhinestone bedazzled neon pink capes and a taxidermy bull's head mounted over the fireplace. This chateau offers truly unique accommodations, perfect for family reunions, small weddings and events.

with caviar lemon and ginger; the classic "Millefeuille" dessert in the Baumanière tradition, done with light Tahitian vanilla cream, pistachio florentine and frozen sea salt caramel. Humbling.

My palate is not accustomed to the decadence of Michelin-starred restaurants. Each bite had surprising flavors, complex combinations, welcoming aromas, zests and tangs that were a real treat for the taste buds. My senses were buzzing, awakened by ingredients so fresh they tasted as if they were recently plucked and traveled straight from dirt to table. Chef Jean-André Charial favors a classic style of cuisine, rooted in the local produce of Provence, with vegetables grown in his own organic garden.

For those foodies who dream of putting on the apron and joining the ranks of celebrity chefs, l'Oustau de Baumanière offers regular cooking classes that share the tricks of the trade. For wine lovers, there are also oenology classes, where guests can learn about the perfect wine pairing. Classes take place in a unique learning environment, their famed wine cellar (one of the largest private cellars in France, stocked with some sixty thousand bottles of wine and best vintages from the region). *Bon appétit.*

ABOUT

(clockwise from top left) Baumanières Mediterranean red mullet with sautéed tomato confit and fresh fennel; goat cheese; Moulin de la Tour's magnificent swimming pool; the Moulin de la Tour 4-poster double bed and spacious en suite; the 5-star Baumanière les Baux de Provence

