



From left: Lavender fields in Provence; Hotel de la Poste in Beaune; House in Chateaufort de Gadagne



## Luxe, Calme et Volupté

944's Miami Managing Editor Tastes the Good Life in Provence

Written by Hadley Henriette

**Marrying a Frenchman is not for the faint of heart** and isn't necessary just to see France like an insider. I love the annual trips but the problem is, my husband doesn't care when we go as long as we get there. Winter, spring, summer, it's all the same to him. But this time I insisted we go in July because I wanted to see fields of blooming lavender probably even more than my husband wanted to see his family.

Our goal was to get to our family and to the hilltop castle near Avignon we had rented to accommodate all of us as quickly as possible. So we skipped Paris altogether and joined the ranks of southward-bound EU members by heading down L'Autoroute du Soleil in our diesel 5-series BMW. We love the stable of cool German and French cars available for rent, but next time, instead of fighting summer traffic, we'll fly there directly or take the TGV.

When we finally arrived that evening, the weather

was cold and drippy, the castle, built in the 1100s, seemed a little small and dark. I worried if we had chosen poorly — until the next morning. When we woke up, the sun was streaming through the windows, dancing on the pool, lighting up our rosemary and sage-laden garden and showing us a million dollar-view of Provence.

Braying donkeys, church bells and the famous *Cigales de Provence* (crickets) provided the soundtrack at the quaint little hillside village upon which our castle was perched. And I found my lavender fields — lots of them. The sunflowers were a bit trickier. We went about our days, not as tourists, but as vacationers. Swimming in the pool, feasting on items like calamari, mussels grilled on a bed of pine needles we collected and lotsa pasta served à table, drinking Côtes du Rhône and driving

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From left: Our medieval castle and its amazing view.

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Our trip was rounded out with a few jaunts into the famous walled city of Avignon. It was our good luck that we were there during the month-long Avignon Theater Festival. Every July, the vibrant city is transformed by the arrival of nearly 50 original plays and their roaming troupes who promote by randomly breaking into acts in crowded public squares, passing out flyers while wearing

outrageous costumes and chatting about their *oeuvres* with general public. The experience is incredibly boho, colorful, exciting and definitely worth the trip, even for those who don't catch a production in one of the quaint jewel-box theaters.

Even if the dollar isn't worth a can of beans, don't miss the July sales, when summer collections are on sale across France (winter collections are up for grabs in January). It's definitely not resort shopping. Neither is this a resort vacation, which, as far as I know, doesn't even exist there. To see France like an insider, book one of the thousands of available rental properties with friends or family. Or, if a hotel is a must, find one in a small town where a lengthy stay can be had. Each room will probably be different

from the next and the front desk will remember every guest's name, even if they can't pronounce it.

Whether visiting in June when the flowers are just poking out of the ground, or in May or September (which is a fabulous time) for the harvest of the world's best wine grapes, make sure to revel in the agricultural, architectural and gastronomical wonder that is France. Don't keep a tight schedule entailing endless visits to vineyards, churches and museums. They will be found almost anywhere, as was the case when we stopped in Beaune and took a trip in an underground wine cellar and toured the famous hospice. We even checked out the Pope's church in Avignon, which took Rome's place for a spell. Still, we had no itinerary, and no fixed schedule aside from our arrival and departure. It's important to stay somewhere long enough to bond with it and just stay put — that is the secret to not feeling like a tourist.

Take a trip at [www.francedirect.net](http://www.francedirect.net)



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## Chew On This Ninefourfour's Picks of Provence

### Drink Locally

Order Chateauneuf-du-Pape and other Côtes du Rhône reds when in Provence. Not only are they grown in the region, they are some of the best wines in the world and great ones can be bought for as little as 4 euros a bottle at the supermarkets.

### Take me to the Market

Every town has a weekly farmers' market. Find out what day it is and plan to go early. Not only will you find fresh produce, but also locally made sausages and artisan cheeses and olives you can eat on the spot and spices you can take home with you.

You might be surprised to learn that most towns have their own specialties. Ask your waiter for regional favorites. In Provence you can't go wrong with ratatouille, loup de mer (from the Mediterranean) and potatoes with the famous herbs de Provence.

