

OVERSEAS

Provence: 30 years on from Peter Mayle's bestselling memoir

Home assesses the eternal appeal of the southern French region

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Bought to book: Peter Mayle's tales of life in Ménerbes, above, have been the stuff of expat fantasy for 30 years
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It is 30 years since Peter Mayle's *A Year in Provence* was published. It is thus 29 years since critical opinion lambasted the book for its rose-tinted, pastis'n'peasants account of the southern French region. And 28 years since *Monsieur je-sais-tout* started blaming an epidemic of tourism — and expat property owners — on its multimillion sales success. "He has brought in crowds of the wrong sort of people," one Provençal estate agent was reported to have said.



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Crikey. The nonsense some folk speak. Mayle's books — *A Year in Provence* and follow-ups *Toujours Provence* and *Encore Provence* — are lovely evocations of his French life and times. And Mayle himself, whom I met a couple of times, and who died last year, was a disarming chap. If you'd read the books, the fellow came as no surprise. But, as he was the first to admit, his supposed influence was laughably overegged. "I've been accused of everything," he said, "including the surfeit of Germans in the cafe."

Let's be clear: Mayle no more "invented" the region as a destination or anything else than Bruce Chatwin invented Patagonia or Eric Newby the Hindu Kush. Visitors have, after all, been piling into Provence since the Romans scattered arenas and theatres about the place. When the papacy shifted to Avignon in the 14th century, it attracted great artists, but also hangers-on, front-rank crooks and whores. Tobias Smollett was in Provence for stretches of the 18th century. Dickens passed through. Tolstoy found the town of Hyères — known for alleged convalescent qualities — "full of chest cases". Queen Victoria was the most majestic among throngs of rich and noble 19th-century fans, whose numbers democratised through the last century and right up to now.

This "ancient English longing for the south" — James Pope-Hennessy's phrase — thus predates Mayle by centuries. And if, today, there are more people roaming the vineyards, olive groves, forests and lavender fields, it may be less the influence of a book, more because flights are cheaper than a ham sandwich. That said, what Mayle did do was to highlight a picaresque Provence involving a daily life of artful tradesmen, wily locals and official insanity along with the sunshine, scents and sensuality.

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This Provence certainly exists. I’ve lived near as dammit in the region for 30 years and can confirm all claims about, for example, southern French plumbers. One of ours, having installed a septic tank, wondered whether we might also need any automatic weapons. He had a full selection for sale, from machine pistols upwards. Claims about builders, too. After our first went spectacularly bust, we hired a burly North African fellow. On completion of a particularly chaotic stairway, he told us that evenly spaced steps were considered a sign of ignorance in Morocco. True Rabat cognoscenti invariably favoured steps of widely differing size. And officialdom? Checking my claim to be properly married to a Frenchwoman as part of an application for French nationality (Brexit *oblige*), two lady gendarmes arrived and asked to visit our bathroom. They needed to check there were two toothbrushes on the shelf.

Nor was Mayle wrong in focusing on a seductively sybaritic Provence. There’s no denying the pleasurable promise furnished by olive trees and lavender, warmth, pristine light, peeling shutters and the drinking of rosé under the stars. Here be vaulted Cistercian abbeys and plainsong; there the rounded forms, high hues and juicy fertility of markets, from Aix (the best) via Arles (the biggest) to Sanary (TV viewers’ favourite 2018). Thus does Provence slide seamlessly from the spiritual to the voluptuous.

Yet all this didn’t spring from nowhere. Its appeal is rooted in rough geography and a hectic history. Fifteen minutes on from aperitifs around the pool, the land may grow wild and elemental, with unruly winds flustering forests and uplands where, within living memory, remoter peasants shared accommodation with their animals and took pagan beliefs to Mass. Some rustics remain alarming, a reasonable reminder that Provence is anything but a theme park of itself.

The openings for biking, hiking, horsing, kayaking, climbing and canyoning are exhausting. Not long ago, I surprised myself by not being dead after a bout of white-water rafting. On the Valensole plateau, alternating summer waves of lavender and wheat glow blue and gold in mesmerising purity. These days, Provence is indeed a peerless playground. Beautiful, too, but the beauty is unyielding. The Provençal landscape has lived hard.

Hill-topping villages such as Gordes, Bonnieux and Ménerbes — Mayle's old Luberon stamping grounds — were perched for defence, not photographs. Now they wear the intangible sheen of outside money. Past times, though, were turbulent with famine, plague and slaughter. In 1545, local Waldensians — essentially, early Protestants; “Vaudois” in French — were wiped out by Catholic authorities in one of France's less well-known bouts of ethnic cleansing. Some 18 villages were destroyed. Religious conflict continued to rattle to their various tunes until the revolution.

Much later, Gordes, the present hub of the holidaying Parisian chatterati, was awarded the Croix de Guerre for its inhabitants' outstanding record of Second World War resistance. Who would have thought it, as you sip beer beneath the plane trees of the Renaissance brasserie? This is the cafe where Marion Cotillard waited tables in Ridley Scott's 2006 movie *A Good Year* — also written by Mayle.

Gordes knows how to play to its strengths, too. Its furtive, vertical streetlets cram in art galleries, shops selling stuff no one needs (herb essences, wrought-iron coat hooks, pottery chickens) and bars that, like the Renaissance, operate an ambitious policy on pricing. But after centuries of penury, no one's begrudging Gordes (or Bonnieux, or Ménerbes, or the rest) a softer life. The region's integrity can stand it.

Wipe off the froth and proper Provençal life continues. Ladies are bustling to church to do the flowers. Basket-toting matrons take 90 minutes to get to the cheese stall, for there's much to be discussed en route. Blokes in bars where they can't spell “cappuccino” talk sex and soccer. Little tractors dart through, chugging to the vineyards. Provence knows perfectly well how to keep the good things tourism brings (cash), shrug off the bad (overweight people in unwise shorts) and stay true to its erratic self of farming, festivity and feuds around the fountain. In Mayle's own words: “Tourist money is good for Provence. It keeps businesses open and sustains all sorts of cultural activity.”

As if to prove him right, piles of that money have, in recent times, fuelled a flurry of posh hotels. To Arles, the most boisterously Provençal of all towns, the Swiss heiress Maja Hoffmann's Luma Foundation is bringing a £134m arts centre with, as its centrepiece, a shiny, twisty nine-storey tower by Frank Gehry. It's due to open this summer. The island of Porquerolles, already as bewitching as a siren, has a new contemporary gallery thanks to the financier Edouard Carmignac and his rock-guitarist son, Charles. You enter the Carmignac Foundation barefoot in order “to connect with the Earth”.

Should you desire a more lasting connection with this earth, now is “a fantastic time” to follow Mayle by buying in Provence, says Hugh Atkins, co-founder of the French property specialist Finest France. Of course, he would say that. But those brave enough to plunge in may be on to a winner: prices are stable and French banks are granting 20-year mortgages with relative ease. That said, Provence doesn’t do bargains. The sort of properties targeted by Britons and other outsiders start at €750,000 (£680,000). “Below that, you’re in the domestic market — essentially, French people moving for work,” Atkins says.

People will ever long for Provence. “It’s that laid-back, traditional way of life, the slow, lazy south, its villages peopled by the characters Mayle described,” says Karen Tait, group editor of France-focused magazines including French Property News. And that life will go on after Brexit.

When you do come, though, learn the language. “Otherwise you miss so much,” Tait says. “I know people who have lived in France for years, but can’t even reserve a table in French. Can you imagine?”

Quite easily. They’re missing not only restaurant tables, but the cultural upsurge in cities such as Marseilles, Aix and Avignon, where you can barely cross the street without hitting a new gallery, museum or the sort of bar that knows what millennials are.

Provence moves on and stays the same. It’s an old land, built on many things: agriculture, art, violence, religion, rocks and recklessness, but also, as Mayle recounted, conviviality, pristine light, food so healthy (fish, olive oil, fruit, veg) that only a regular intake of rosé wine gives mortality a chance. Tourism skips lightly across the surface. “The only thing I want of tomorrow,” Mayle once said, “is that it be as good as today.”

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HOMES FOR SALE IN PROVENCE



St-Martin-de-la-Brasque €350,000

A four-bedroom house in one of the region's charming villages, with mountain views from its shuttered windows. It's 10km north of Pertuis and 33km from Aix-en-Provence. *0870 011 5151, frenchestateagents.com*



Loriol-du-Comtat €630,000

This five-bedroom farmhouse has exposed beams, stripped-back interiors and high-speed internet to keep you connected. It's less than half an hour's drive from Avignon. *0870 011 5151, frenchestateagents.com*



Lourmarin €1.15m

Set in vineyards, olive groves and almond trees, this 18th-century farmhouse has six bedrooms and a wine cellar. It's in a pretty village 22km from Mayle's favoured Ménerbes and 39km from Aix. 020 7861 1083, knightfrank.com



Gordes €2.14m

An hour's drive from Marseilles airport, this five-bedroom country retreat is in a village popular with the holidaying Parisian chatterati. There's a separate two-bedroom guesthouse. 020 3824 1951, christiesrealestate.com



Uzès €3.675m

The towers were a 19th-century afterthought that came 200 years after this hilltop chateau was built — and the heated pool was a more recent one. The 16-bedroom pile can be bought fully furnished. 020 8144 5501, home-hunts.com

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