

TRAVEL

# A retirement gift to myself: Two months in Provence

By **Paul Hemp** Globe correspondent, Updated December 20, 2024, 9:00 a.m.



The building where I lived. PAUL HEMP

**T**hirty-five years ago, [“A Year in Provence”](#) helped spark a tourism boom in the Luberon region of southern France. In fact, the book was so popular (reported worldwide sales of more than 6 million, followed by a BBC television series) and the foreign tourists so

numerous (many of whom came to see the farmhouse whose renovation Peter Mayle describes in his memoir) that the author decamped to Long Island!

Certainly, the Luberon has much to recommend it. Medieval hilltop villages, some crowned with a castle. Picture-perfect vineyards and wineries. Olive groves, fields of fragrant lavender, meadows spangled with wild poppies. The craggy limestone peaks of the Luberon range, which bisects the region.

But part of the Luberon's charm for Mayle, a Brit, was the feeling that he and his wife had stumbled on an idyllic and undiscovered — at least by foreigners — corner of France. No longer. These days, some million and a half tourists flock to the Luberon annually, nearly half of them foreign visitors.

It's still possible, though, to recapture some of the magic that Mayle experienced. Try spending a couple of months in the Luberon instead of a few days. Try staying not in one of the well-known tourist destinations but in a village where, charming though it may be, the sights are secondary to the daily life of those who live there. By immersing yourself in your temporary home, you can establish memorable relationships with residents. And instead of drive-by exposure to well-known sights accessible to any visitor, you can absorb local history and even make it your own.





Beaumont de Pertuis. PAUL HEMP

## **My retirement reward**

As a retirement present, I gave myself two months in France, where I had worked for a year and a half after college — picking grapes, washing dishes, managing a beach, herding cows. Much of that time was spent in Provence, but I had never been to the Luberon, a compact region east of Avignon and north of Aix-en-Provence. I found online an apartment to rent for the months of April and May in the small village of Beaumont de Pertuis, located in the southeast corner of the Luberon. I was initially a bit disappointed that the town wasn't mentioned in tourist guides of the area. But that turned out to be a big part of its appeal.

Beaumont is certainly as picturesque as one could hope for. A circular maze of narrow streets and tiny alleys winds its way in a spiral up to a square with a fountain. Beaumont was a prosperous medieval market town and, although the chateau at the top of the village was mostly destroyed in

the French Wars of Religion in the 16th century, an 11th-century church with a belltower still fronts the square. Wandering the streets of closely packed houses with colorful shutters, you'll round a corner to be greeted by the sound of water splashing into a pool from a gargoyle-like spigot set in yellow limestone. (No longer sources of potable water, these fountains are gathering places where residents fill watering cans for their flower-filled window boxes.) From the rooftop terrace of my garret apartment next to the church, I could look out over the tile roofs of the village to the vineyards of the surrounding countryside.

But Beaumont turned out to be more than a Provençal stage set, more than a collection of quaint second homes owned by people from Paris or Marseilles. Many of the centuries-old houses are occupied by families, whose children play kickball in the alleys and attend school in town. (From my balcony, I could hear their cries rising up from the playground of the modern elementary school at the foot of the hill, just outside the ramparts of the old city.) Beaumont's one commercial street, lined with plane trees, has a small grocery, a bar/café frequented by local tradespeople, a "tabac" and newsstand, and an unpretentious pizzeria with menus reflecting the season. While I was there, an EV charging station was installed at the small municipal parking lot.





Returning to Beaumont on my daily walk. PAUL HEMP

## **A secret staircase and the Marquis de Sade**

Although Beaumont is off the main Luberon tourist circuit, it is a good base for exploring the more celebrated sights of the region. The narrow roads leaving Beaumont — seemingly wide enough for 1½ oncoming cars to comfortably pass one another — can be unnerving. But you can reach anywhere in the Luberon in an hour.

There is an endless array of things to see and do as you get to know the region during an extended stay. The otherworldly, rust-colored canyons of the ochre quarries near Roussillon, where the industrial process for making ochre pigment originated in the 18th century. Abandoned farming hamlets made up of dry-stone structures called “bories” — sheep pens, threshing areas, beehive-shaped huts — whose origins are lost in time. The remains of a surprisingly intact fortified village perched on the spur of a cliff deep in the rugged Luberon massif.

This difficult-to-reach site, known as Fort Buoux, was built in the early Middle Ages on the site of an Iron-Age, Ligurian-Celtic “oppidum”; more than a millennium later, it served as a defensive refuge for persecuted Protestants. Abandoned in the 17th century, the site is approached on foot, first by skirting a massive rock overhang once inhabited by nomadic Neanderthals. Nearby, the ground is pockmarked with ninth-century sarcophagi hollowed out of the stone, each — somewhat spookily — created for a specific body. You then ascend a crumbling path to the settlement on top, where you’ll find a 13th-century church, a watchtower, and grain silos and cisterns carved into the rock. There are breathtaking views — and vertiginous drop-offs. (A sign warns that the site will be off-limits in the case of “rain, snow, or strong winds.”) There’s also a secret staircase with steps carved into the cliff, apparently designed to enable a precarious evacuation if attackers breached the main entrance.

But the highlights of the Luberon are the numerous villages dotting the countryside. Several are designated among “the most beautiful villages in France,” including Lourmarin, with a Renaissance castle restored in the 1920s, as well as numerous cafés, art galleries, upscale boutiques — and the grave of Albert Camus. The village of Lacoste is home to the crumbling ruins of the Marquis de Sade’s onetime chateau, featured in several of his novels and partially restored in more recent times by Pierre Cardin. (A sign of the Luberon’s increasing renown among foreigners: In 2002, Savannah College of Art & Design opened a campus in the village.)

Beaumont’s two nearest neighbors, the villages of Grambois and Mirabeau, were in fact Provençal stage sets — locations in the shooting of a pair of iconic French films, “Jean de Florette” and “Manon des Sources,” starring Yves Montand and Gérard Depardieu.

In such places, though, you can’t help but feel like one of the touristic throng. Another of Peter Mayle’s books, a novel set in the Luberon, was made into a 2006 film called “A Good Year,” directed by Ridley Scott and starring Russell Crowe. The chateau and winery where it was set, in the village of Bonnieux, has a stern warning on its English-language website: “[M]ore than 18 years after the shooting, we are tired of the little respectful attitude of some visitors. ... No visits of the film location.” (The winery, obviously, didn’t have Peter Mayle’s option of picking up and moving to Long Island.)





Beaumont de Pertuis. PAUL HEMP

## **Chatting with the mayor**

Beaumont de Pertuis doesn't have such problems. And that allowed a foreign visitor spending two months in the village to begin to feel a part of the community. The grocer I visited daily helped me when I got locked out of my rental car. I met people from the small congregation at the medieval church in the square. (Although services are only held every few weeks, the bell in the church tower next to my top-floor apartment marked the hours with a clang — and a rousing extended peal every day at 7 a.m.). Maritza, who has a pottery studio in the village's former olive press, and I established a bond when it turned out we were both born in November of the same year.

I later ran into her at a public dinner at the community center where Beaumont residents celebrated, via Zoom, their relationship with residents of Farnèse, a sister town in Italy. She invited me to a May 1 picnic in the community gardens highlighting the village's environmental



initiatives. “There’s a spirit here, a solidarity,” she explained. “People know and help one another.” (A perhaps questionable sign of my entry into the Beaumont community: The quarterly report of the town government included a photo of me having lunch at a picnic table, chatting with the mayor!)

My home in Beaumont was a beautiful fourth-floor walk-up apartment in an 18th-century house at the top of the village, once the residence of the King of France’s local representative, later the town hall, and then a school. The building had been abandoned for years before a French-American couple, who saw it when vacationing nearby, meticulously restored it beginning in 2018. One wall of the house was originally part of the tower of the destroyed Beaumont chateau. A labyrinth of connected cellars were once part of the village’s water reservoir and the location of its communal bread oven.



The author zooms in on his apartment. PAUL HEMP



## Fifth-century hermit

From my terrace, I could see a giant cross on a hill that rises sharply on the other side of the village. This became the destination of my daily 3-mile walk. The loop began with a rocky scramble 500 feet up to the cross at the summit, which stands in front of a 12th-century chapel called the Ste. Croix hermitage. From this viewpoint, the village clustering around its own smaller hill far below (through the telephoto lens of my phone's camera, I could just pick out the balcony of my apartment) looked like a medieval toy town. And the panoramic view of the countryside, with colors that changed as spring arrived, extended in the distance to the first rank of snow-covered Alps. From the hermitage, it was a leisurely stroll down to the village through forest and vineyards, whose colors and foliage also reflected the coming of spring.

Little did I know that these daily walks would lead me to one of the high points of my stay in Beaumont, a challenging visit to a remote cave occupied by a hermit — in the fifth century! In asking around about the history of the Ste. Croix hermitage, I learned that Beaumont had also been home to a certain St. Eucherius, whose statue looks down from a hillside as you drive into the village. He was an influential theologian of the early Christian church, one whose legacy long outlived him. In fact, one of his works, a doomsaying essay entitled “De Contemptu Mundi,” “On the Contempt of the World,” was edited and published more than 1,000 years after his death — by Erasmus in 1520!

Eucherius ultimately became the Bishop of Lyon, but he earlier lived an ascetic life of prayer in a cave in the cliffs overlooking the Durance River. In fact, the name Beaumont, instead of signifying “beautiful mountain,” as one might think, appears to have originated with the word “Baùmoun,” which in the Provençal dialect means cave.

Today, the ruins of a chapel and priory, founded in the 12th century to honor St. Eucherius and built into the foot of these cliffs, lies hidden in the trees just off the highway that runs along the river. But I learned from people in the village that the cave St. Eusterius is believed to have inhabited in the fifth century also still exists. Though practically inaccessible, it could be reached, I learned, via an unmarked path from the top of the cliff.





The approach to St. Eucherius's cave requires some sure-footedness. PAUL HEMP

## **A harrowing approach**

From the highway, a rough track gradually climbs for a mile or so up the escarpment, before a steep path forks off toward the cliff edge. After getting partway down, occasionally sliding in the loose rock, I paused to catch my breath at a rock outcropping — and looked down at the several-hundred-foot straight drop to the highway below. Then I noticed, off to one side, a heavy chain attached to the cliff, enabling someone to descend to a balcony and the entrance to the cave. Having come this far, I reached what was a disappointing conclusion: No way was I going down that chain!

But then, a week before I left Beaumont, my 26-year-old daughter came to visit, and she thought it would be cool to visit the hermit's cave. If I could survive our descent down the secret staircase at



Fort Buoux, she said, I could manage this. So I returned with her to the site and, anxiously gripping the chain, rappelled down the steep rock pitch after her.



St. Eucherius's cave. PAUL HEMP

About 30 or so feet into the cave it opened into a chamber with a stone altar and a statue of St. Eucherius in bishop's garb. Sadly, the figure, thought to date from the 15th century when the cave was made into a chapel, was defaced in recent years by vandals, who knocked off its head. At the back of the chamber, a passage opened onto a natural rock ramp leading down to a network of



galleries, which I later learned led to a second opening in the cliff face below. With our cellphones providing the only light, we wisely decided to return to the chapel.

Despite the desecration of the statue and the graffiti scratched onto the stone walls — some of which appeared to be centuries old — it was easy to succumb to the mystery of this place.

Eucherius was a Gallo-Roman nobleman and senator. After his two sons were born, he and his wife separately opted for a monastic life, as did his sons, who also were canonized.

What was on this man's mind — not 200 or 500 or 1,000 but more than 1,500 years ago? If we could speak across the years, what would he say? Would he seem in any way familiar to us? What was his life like? How did he get down the rock face to his cell?!

Alone with my daughter in this isolated cavern, the weight — the strangeness — of human history was palpable. More than the Provençal countryside, more than the quaint villages or the castles, this place embedded itself in my experience of the Luberon.

A week after our cliffside visit to St. Eucherius's cave, my daughter and I packed up and left Beaumont de Pertuis. It was a wistful departure. But I felt certain I'd be back to visit. After all, Peter Mayle, who died in 2018, couldn't stay away. He returned to the Luberon from Long Island — albeit to a secluded country estate rather than to his besieged farmhouse! — where he passed the last years of his life.

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