

The good life in Provence

A former Auckland restaurateur has found
heaven in a historic French village

ABOUT five years ago, after the Venice Biennale and a trapeze through the famous art galleries of Italy, I went to Provence to do some painting. Nothing special - just a couple of bloody big walls in a 19th century maison.

The imposing hillside mansion, two linked houses with eight bedrooms in total, is owned by former Auckland restaurateur Amanda Taylor-Ace. This magnificent stone building with its swimming pool, walled garden, terraces and view across the countryside is in the village of St Maximin, only minutes from the historic town of Uzes and less than half an hour from Avignon.



In the morning I'd climb a ladder to apply a wash to the towering three storey entrance *foyer*, at lunch we'd eat at a poolside table creaking with fresh local produce, and after a swim I'd get back-up the ladder for a while. Every night we'd drink enormous amounts of wine - at \$3 a litre it seemed a shame to do otherwise - and the following day we'd start again.

One night there was a party in the square to which the whole village turned out - there are only 600 people but they are from 18 different nationalities - and sometimes we slotted in day trips to Pont du Gard, the 2000-year-old Roman aqueduct just five minutes away, or shopped in Uzes for cheeses and fruit.

Briefly back in Auckland- she gets out of St Maximin in winter - she settles over a champagne and wine and tells how she sold La Poste restaurant in Takapuna and took the money for a journey to France, her mother's homeland.

"In September it will have been five years since I bought the maison. For once, because I'm such an impulsive person, I did some research and had my daughter Samantha help me. We went out every day around the whole of Provence and took notes and digital photos, and quickly found what we didn't want but formulated ideas on what we did.

"I wanted to be in a village in a stone place covered in vines, facing the sun and with a swimming pool in a typical Provencal place."

And that is exactly what she got in St Maximin. "It used to be the *Maison de maitre* and was the second most important house in the village, usually occupied by a nobleman or someone from the government in Paris.

"And that's why I've called it *Maison de Maitresse*, which is tongue-in-cheek. But the French, being so polite, don't know if I'm just totally ignorant or I'm a kept

woman. And they don't ask."

What Taylor-Ace got was two stone houses that had been used as a rental property.

She has renovated them both, put in two more toilets, the outdoor area has been re-terraced, and she rents these homely places with their open fires and dining tables to international guests.

She has no trouble filling the place because the attractions of St Maximin are many: the village is protected and nothing new can be built, facades cannot be changed. The 17th-century playwright Jean Racine lived there, which adds historic value.

Outside the old village on the other side of the hill there are new houses, but the character of central St Maximin hasn't changed despite the arrival of non-French residents, most of whom have come to buy and restore the old houses.

"It was relatively easy to buy because I was bringing enough money to pay for half of it and was courted by some building companies. I ended up buying with a loan of 2.5 per cent for 20 years for the other half. So why would you pay it off?

"You pay the same amount every month, it doesn't go up or down, so financially you know where you are. Not everybody gets that deal, I was in the right place at the right time and the market was down.

"We're right in a tourist area with Avignon and Nimes within half an hour, and we have the best weather in France. Last year we had three months with only 3 days of rain. You could say, 'Come to a barbecue next week' and you could do it. New Zealand? Even on the morning you are wondering if you can sit outside."

In the village there is a casual cafe, a chateau that serves upmarket meals, and an auberge (old-style tavern) a few minutes' walk away. At the bottom of the village is a pizzeria and there are two restaurants just over the hill.

In Uzès there are 50 restaurants, including one in a 1649 maison run by, a New Zealand couple.

It's three hours' drive on excellent roads to Barcelona. You can be in Italy in four hours.

It's easy to reach from Paris, most tourists' first port of call in France. The fast train, which leaves from Charles de Gaulle airport, gets you to Avignon in less than three hours.

"I tell people not to bother driving from Paris, the trip isn't interesting and it takes you forever to get out of Paris. You just get on the train and hire the car in Avignon and you are half an hour from my place on a lovely winding road through fabulous scenery.

"My original idea was to set up a cooking school in France and bring groups from New Zealand to do two weeks alternating a day of cooking with sightseeing. But I've been so busy with the rentals I've never done it.

"You can do these day trips, come back and have a swim and start with your pastis or champagne, then have your barbecue on the top terrace. It's magic. When

people leave they've had a great holiday and a wonderful experience of French village life."

Guests stay for a week minimum. Taylor-Ace greets them with a basket of local produce and wine then either leaves them alone or makes meals if asked. She mostly caters for Americans and Britons, but also groups of New Zealanders.

"The Kiwis love it. They have heard by word of mouth and this is the first year I've actually advertised. The cost depends on the season, but in the high season of July-August it is 41800 (\$3385) a week. But if you divide, that between eight people it works out about \$400 a week per person, which is way cheaper than staying in a bed-and breakfast.

"And we've got a pool, a kitchen and I pour a mean drink. We've got a beaujolais soup. It's a secret mix but it gets everyone."

Taylor-Ace is an unrepentant party girl so ask her what she does all day when guests are there and the answer is enviously obvious.

"I have fun, darling. I'm making money having fun. How bad is that?"

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