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A Work of

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# Art

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*ROOKSANA HOSSENALLY* soaks up the irresistible allure of the French Riviera in picture-perfect Saint Paul de Vence



**H**alfway between Antibes and Nice on the French Riviera – just three miles inland from the sandy shores of Renoir's charming village retreat, Cagnes-sur-Mer – is a tiny hilltop medieval village that has captivated the imaginations of the world's artists for almost a century. Within its 16th-century ramparts, cobblestoned streets lined with fuchsia bougainvillea wind up the hill and culminate at the 10th-century Saint-Michel chapel, where the Saint Paul de Vence story all began. Up here, the breath-taking sight of sun-soaked Provence stretches all the way to the Mediterranean Sea. However, the dazzling views are no more than a bonus to this bewitching little Provençal village.

Ever since the 1940s, Saint Paul's picturesque setting has provided writers and artists with a bottomless source of inspiration, and world-famous actors with a spot away from the bright lights of Cannes and Nice. As a result, news of its charms has travelled far and wide so in peak season (May to September) the village's streets tend to teem with visitors. However, when I arrive just on the cusp of peak time, the narrow streets are still, and aside from the souls of long-gone artists who have chosen the village as their final resting place, I have it all to myself. Its small squares are often underpinned by intriguing artworks made from iron horseshoes by the contemporary French artist Rémi Pesce. But an artists' retreat wasn't always Saint Paul de Vence's *raison d'être*.

A border stronghold between Provence and Savoy from 1388, it was from this time that its ramparts were built. Saint Paul also held a strategic position in France's defence against Italy until the 18th century, when the village experienced a religious renaissance attracting noble families who established themselves here. The village later became known for its mills where olives and flowers would be brought to be ground until the 1930s, after which it became a retreat for countless writers, such as F. Scott Fitzgerald and George Bernard Shaw, and artists including Franco-Russian artist Marc Chagall, who spent the last

three decades of his life here. For him, Saint Paul was "the only place where the true light of the south can be found" and it is here that he painted his most famous works.

A veritable icon, Chagall is actually buried in the village graveyard alongside Aimé and Marguerite Maeght, the founders of the nearby Fondation Maeght.

Artists like Paul Signac began visiting Saint Paul in the 1920s, and in the 1940s the village was inundated with young writers, who were drawn to its irresistible tranquillity. However, it wasn't until the 1950s when top French actors of the day Yves Montand and Simone Signoret moved into the village, where they met and married, that it reached its glitzy peak. Around the same time, French poet and screenwriter Jacques Prévert also came to live in Saint Paul and moved into 'La Miette', an

## Director Alfred Hitchcock was yet another to fall under Saint Paul's spell

enchancing stone mansion that can still be found on rue de l'Allée in the centre of the village. The new residents paved the way for other celebrities who flocked to the haven in search of a quiet bucolic break. Actor Jean-Paul Belmondo visited the village regularly, as well as international icons like Kirk Douglas, Orson Welles, Gene Wilder, Michael Caine, and Roger Moore, to name a few. Alfred Hitchcock was another to fall under Saint Paul's spell. He even wanted to feature its streets in his film *To Catch a Thief*, a request the mayor refused (much to the outrage of Hitchcock).

This *beau petit monde* would be seen at La Colombe d'Or, the most prized spot of the village at the time. Established in 1920 by local artist Paul Roux, the restaurant with rooms is located at the village entrance, where it still operates. The place to see and be seen, its clientele included Marc Chagall, Pablo Picasso, Henri ▶



Above, from left/ Marc Chagall; Michael Caine & Roger Moore



► Matisse, Georges Braque and Jean-Michel Folon, among others.

It became a veritable icon in its own right, and as a result, boasts an impressive collection of artworks bequeathed by its guests. In fact, the inn was so emblematic of the village's arty heyday that it even had the motto, "(Guests are) Welcome here on foot, on horseback, or on canvas!"

Today, Saint Paul still draws artists from across the globe and while it is true that much of the works found in the art galleries within the village are replicas, there are a handful of places that still maintain the standards of the village's creative reputation. The most popular galleries include the Frédéric Gollong Gallery, which was one of the first in the village, and Le Capricorne,

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for its works by Chagall, Picasso and Matisse. Another favourite is the gallery of artist and close friend of Folon, Guy Pieters. It is possible to browse works by Folon but also pieces by the likes of Yves Klein, Niki de Saint Phalle and Robert Indiana. Visitors can meet working artists at their studios like Jean-Claude Tron, Danielle Alarcon Dalvin, Mesha Sendyk, and Cybèle.

However, when it comes to the village's art heritage, one of the real showstoppers is Jean-Michel Folon's chapel, also known as the White Penitents' Chapel. The 17th century building saw a complete overhaul by the Belgian artist and reopened in 2008. Homage to Folon's 30-year love affair with Saint Paul de Vence, his vibrant pastel mosaic, his smooth sculptures, stained glass windows and murals took a team of eight artisans a painstaking two years to finish. The spectacular interior evokes a warm and harmonious backdrop depicting Saint Paul de Vence bathed in the unique golden light that has inspired so many visitors over the years.

Back down the hill, along the rue Grande, the village's main artery, past its art galleries, boutiques and restaurants, and on the way out of the village is the Place Charles de Gaulle, also known as Place du Jeu de Boules, which La Colombe d'Or shares with the famous Café de la Place. It is another key spot where artists and actors were seen nursing a glass of chilled rosé while

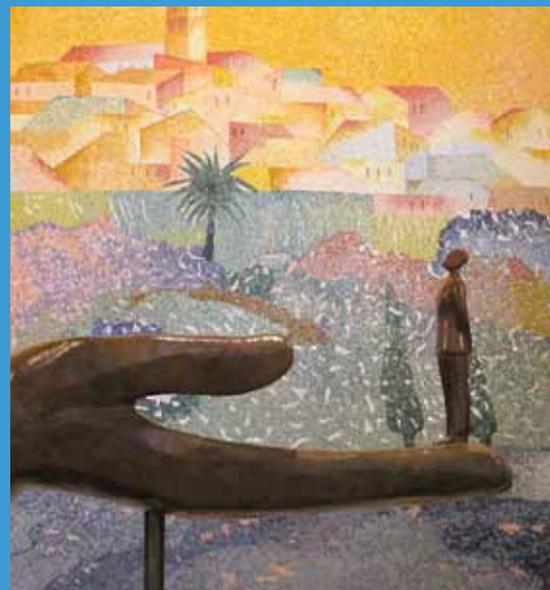
From left/ Jacques Prévert; Simone Signoret; Fondation Maeght; La Colombe d'Or; Folon Chapel



playing a game of pétanque (bowls) with the locals.

A 20-minute stroll away from here is the must-see Art Deco Fondation Maeght, which holds one of the world's most impressive modern art collections. Inaugurated in 1964, the Fondation nestles in a garden scattered with in-situ works. Designed by Catalan architect Josep Lluís, the private museum was a work of love for the aforementioned founders Aimé and Marguerite, who built it in remembrance of their deceased son. A magnificent homage, exploring the museum is akin to stepping into an enchanted dream world of lives past. Artworks by Alberto Giacometti and Joan Miró, mosaics by Marc Chagall and Pierre Tal-Coat, stained glass works by Georges Braque and a fountain by Pol Bury, are featured throughout the building's glass-wrapped interiors and courtyards.





The Fondation is a welcome peaceful break from the village streets, which can be crowded in the hotter months. The tranquillity and pastoral Provençal backdrop are the reasons why I opt to stay outside the ramparts. A five-minute drive from the Fondation is the laid-back five-star boutique hotel Le Mas de Pierre. An oasis of glorious gardens planted with centuries-old olive trees and lavender, Saint Paul's art heritage lives on here with poetic works by Folon and pop-art pieces by Robert Indiana, which give the cluster of bastides (typical stone houses of the region) a contemporary twist.

A Relais & Châteaux hotel, the quaint and compact Le Mas de Pierre has seven bastides, of about 10 rooms each, spread across the luxuriant gardens. However, for ultimate bliss, I stay in one of the six spacious and individually decorated suites of the hotel's Bastide des Fleurs annex, inaugurated

just last year. This bastide has a separate pool that comes lined with smart white cabanas for sunbathing in the utmost comfort – and for that extra touch, a butler is on call to satisfy guests' every whim.

When it comes to dining, guests can choose to have room service, but the restaurant is worth the detour. Located in the gardens, the terrace looks out onto surrounding vineyards and rolling hills all the way to the horizon. I found this spot to be a heavenly corner to indulge in a delicious lunch of fresh turbot fish caught that morning and full-flavoured, locally grown vegetables, teamed with a glass of chilled Sancerre to round-off the experience that strikes as close to perfection as it gets. ■

## MORE INFORMATION

London Heathrow to Nice Airport from £218 return with British Airways or a TGV (high-speed) train from Paris to Nice, from £140 return per person.

A Prestige Suite at Le Mas de Pierre's Bastide des Fleurs from £141 per night (for two people).  
2320 route de Serres, 06570 Saint Paul de Vence  
[lemasdepierre.com](http://lemasdepierre.com)

A suite at La Colombe d'Or from £330 per night.  
06570 Saint Paul de Vence  
[la-colombe-dor.com](http://la-colombe-dor.com)

