

Provence's St-Paul

1 Jun 2009 by Nick Lander/BA Business Life

Despite the early morning sunshine, my wife [that's me, probably fretting over this website - JR] was initially reluctant to accompany me on a brief pre-breakfast walk along the medieval ramparts of St-Paul de Vence, less than half an hour's drive from Nice airport. But within five minutes from the front door of the Hotel Le Saint-Paul it was obvious to us both why this well-preserved hilltop has become the second most visited site in France after Mont St-Michel off the coast of Brittany.

The Alps are to the north; the Mediterranean to the south; and in and around the village are all the hallmarks of Provençal life; narrow, cobbled streets; olive trees; and terraced vineyards. And within walking distance of the village, we were about to discover, are an extraordinary art gallery and three very different, highly enjoyable places in which to eat and drink.

We began at **Fondation Maeght**, a stunning building that is no more than a gentle 15-minute walk from the centre of the village. Built in the 1960s by Marguerite and Aimé Maeght, it houses some extraordinary art on the walls and some wonderful sculpture in the gardens under huge pines.

Armed with postcards we walked back and settled down on the sunny terrace of the Café de la Place to write them.

This café provides an excellent vantage point from which to watch French life go by. There was a stall selling fruit, flowers and homemade jams; a couple of burly policemen on traffic duty; children playing ball on the area that at night becomes the place where the older inhabitants play boules under the plane trees; and dogs aplenty. We finished our drinks just in time to stroll the 20 metres to lunch at **La Colombe d'Or**.

This hotel and restaurant have over the years become synonymous with St-Paul de Vence. The establishment was once hugely popular with artists and is equally so today with a host of faithful visitors who during its busy season occupy its 25 bedrooms. The hotel's two other claims to fame are the art, both paintings and sculptures, that covers the walls and corridors throughout (I lost my heart to one particular Matisse in the restaurant), and the sun-dappled terrace that is an extension of the restaurant.

It was here that we joined tables whose customers seemed to be speaking every language but French. La Colombe d'Or has become one of those places that everyone wants to visit at least once, with some justification, but a consequence of universal popularity, I have come to learn, is often that either the food or the service can be disappointing.

In this case the staff could not have been more friendly, from the moment our booking was taken to the end of the meal when our waiter appeared with two small complimentary glasses of the local mandarine-flavoured eau de vie. But the cooking was somewhat disappointing. While the star of the meal was a vast basket of raw vegetables served with a thick, pungent anchovy sauce, there was something definitely slapdash about how my red mullet had been cooked as well as our other main course of cod served with aioli, the garlic sauce that Provence has kindly bequeathed to the rest of the world.

The setting of the **Hotel Le Saint-Paul** is simultaneously more rambling and more formal. Five separate houses were drawn together 20 years ago to create a succession of small rooms and terraces with wonderful views and the great comfort that is an integral part of the Relais & Châteaux organisation.

Its kitchen, overseen by head chef Ludovic Puzenat, boasts an absolutely first-class pastry section. Their breads, croissants, pains au chocolat, jams and fruit purees are some of the very best I have ever come across. And, they seemed to me at least, to taste even better after a short walk in the early morning sunshine.

La Colombe d'Or www.la-colombe-dor.com
Hotel Le Saint Paul www.lesaintpaul.com