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### **Before and After: Provence Style**

By Louis Borgenicht

This is a story about before and after: how a successful Salt Lake City realtor picked up her roots and moved to Provence to be near her daughter and grandchildren and in the process opened a bed-and-breakfast in the town of Pernes-les-Fontaines in near record time.

The saga of Georgia's move to Provence began not unlike a dream that many Francophiles harbor, taking shape four years ago as she and her daughter, Julie, who lives in the French Alps, were driving on the N 100 near Les Beaumettes.

"I'm going to live here," Georgia declared emphatically.

Julie, hardly taken aback, said calmly, "OK, let's talk about it."

Less than six months later, a week after 9/11, Georgia took a planned bicycle trip to Tuscany and ended up reconnoitering with Julie, who had contacted a Provencal realtor who had cased out several potential suitable homes for consideration.

"It was an interesting process being on the other end of the real-estate transaction. Someone else (in this case, Lionel) was in control," explained Georgia. "We saw The Chicken House. The place was teeming with fancy chickens and the owner was more concerned with making sure we did not step on her brood than in selling the house. Then there was the three-storey house with no kitchen, the residence of at least eight people. To this day I have no clue how they lived there."

Following a physically and emotionally draining second day of touring around Provence, the two women realized that they had not seen anything Georgia "could not live without" and were ready to call the search off, at least temporarily. Just as that thought had surfaced, Lionel's phone rang: it was a call from the people selling the property destined to become Le Lavandin.

The three of them visited Pernes-les-Fontaines the next day and Georgia knew intuitively that this was the place for her. For the sake of deal-making Julie urged her to suppress her exuberance.

"Oh my God," Georgia said out loud on entering the property.

"Shh, mom," Julie warned.

They finished the walk-through (lavender fields, fig trees, a wooded area behind the main house, and a useable swimming pool) and it was then the reality of a bed-and-breakfast began to take shape.

On returning to Salt Lake City, Georgia contacted a friend of hers to consider a joint venture/investment and ten days later made an offer. It was the end of October 2001. Over the next eight months Georgia made three trips to Provence to attempt to close the deal, but the bureaucracy of French realty was complicated. The first realization, much to her surprise, was that with most US housing sales the realtor makes six percent of the selling price; it appeared that this French real estate agent could make eight percent of the asking price (usually much higher than the selling price).

Then there was the realization that the title to the property was not actually in the names of the people selling it. Next came the news that in order to get a bank loan Georgia had to undergo a complete physical, including visits to un cardiologiste, un gènÈraliste, et un pathologiste (who drew 12 tubes of blood to ascertain whether any chemical imbalances existed). She wondered if a visit to un psychiatriste might have been more valuable.

Finally, on June 21st, 2002, the longest day of the year, "the longest closing in French history" (according to Georgia) was concluded. For some inexplicable, probably historical, reason sellers in France can remain in their sold house for 15 days after closing and Georgia stayed at arm's length, watching from a distance as her new home was emptied. Aside from all

their possessions, both of the residents were artists, and in addition the detritus from 20 cats and 3 dogs had to be dealt with.

Georgia spent her first night in her new home in July. As she opened the door to the main house she set off the alarm and couldn't figure out how to turn it off. She sat outside in the bucolic French countryside, listening to the shrill sound, laughing quietly and waiting for help from a neighbor. Once she was alone in her empty house (she had only a bed to sleep in) she said she felt like Julie Andrews in the opening scene of *The Sound of Music*. She slept "like a log" and felt that she had "awakened in a dream."

By October Georgia had been promised a new kitchen and an extra bathroom in the main house; three months later nothing had been done. Discernible work began in earnest on January 15th. When the weather improved the workers (eight to twenty depending on need) invited Georgia to partake of a monthly pique-nique of roasted meat, sausage, vegetables and Marquesas, a welcome gustatory and bonding break in the frenetic pace of reconstruction. The only major catastrophe occurred three weeks into the project. Georgia had decided to make a guesthouse out of the artists' workshop and planned to move one wall of the structure. Shortly after the wall was taken down the other three collapsed. Georgia's poignant image of the scene was of a Tunisian worker dancing from foot to foot amidst the rubble shrieking, "Aiy, aiy, aiy, aiy, aiy."

Four and one half months from the beginning of construction, *Le Lavandin* stood on its own, almost ready to receive visitors. Georgia, whose French was rudimentary but improving daily, had been furnishing the house even during construction. She outfitted her study at IKEA and realized when she got home that amidst her purchases were the arms for a desk chair but no chair. After several trips and letters to the store manager she decided to confront the issue in person and ventured back to IKEA. Showing her receipt and trying to explain in broken French she finally got an explanation: the chair, displayed in an office vignette at the store, had separate tags for the arms and the chair itself.

"Madame, you did not purchase the chair," said the English-speaking manager.

Another incident ended up putting Georgia in the hands of a most mysterious kinesthesiologist. She had lifted something heavy that had tweaked her back. One of the construction supervisors suggested a therapist in a tiny nearby village. His house was difficult to find even in a small town: there were no street names. She found the antiquated, albeit charming, house and entered through the back door. A short man with thick glasses held on to his head with a wool head band greeted her and ushered her to a wooden table. It was bare, without a sheet or mattress for comfort. Georgia lay down fully clothed on her back. The "kine," who spoke little English, did something very strange: he placed three fingers of his right hand on her thigh just above her knee and three fingers of his left hand on her hip bone; bent his body so his buttocks stuck out; and began a repetitive vibrating movement which lasted ten minutes.

"Better?" asked the kine.

"Not really," said Georgia.

The procedure was repeated and the outcome was the same. As she left the kine refused to take her money. It was as if he was disappointed in himself.

The work on the bed and breakfast completed, it was time to start planning for its opening. The first summer (2003) Le Lavandin opened to a nearly full complement of visitors and a smattering of workshops (writing, painting and wine tasting). It was a process that taught Georgia a lot.

"You have to know things to be an innkeeper," Georgia said philosophically. "You need to figure out the balance between the needs of your†guests and your own. Making things run smoothly and simply takes a lot of energy, both physical and emotional. Thinking and planning is exhausting and you learn your own limitations. But vraiment, I've never enjoyed anything more and have never been happier in my life."

"One of the most interesting things," she continued, "is watching how different people cope with travel. Some are anxious and insecure and need guidance and specific suggestions; others just seem to wing it. I try to

provide a happy medium. I think the only reason I have been able to do this is that I believed no one's expectations would be any different from mine."

Georgia is a vivacious, energetic, self-motivated, middle-aged innkeeper with impeccable taste. My wife Jody and I stayed with her last July for five days and came away wanting to duplicate the bathroom in her guesthouse at our own home. Visiting marches in Isle Sur la Sorgue with Georgia is an experience. In her broken but improving French she meanders through the market, talking to almost all the vendors, who dote on her to the point of seemingly giving their wares to her at un prix special.

"Georgia," the fruitier shouts, for example, "comment va Le Lavandin?" Undoubtedly he, like his fellow purveyors, feels a part of the transformation of the house into a B &B.

Another person who watched the process was Georgia's neighbor, who raises sheep, squash blossoms and blette (Swiss chard), which she sells daily in Avignon. I was never able to set eyes on her during my visit but awakened to sheep bells early every morning. Mme P, a 76-year-old woman who cannot abide Georgia's imperfect French, apparently dresses the same way every day of the year regardless of weather: wool leggings and a wool hat. Ah, the eclecticism of Provence.

There are two questions Georgia gets asked by her friends, many of whom thought she was crazy to undertake the move and the remodel at Le Lavandin.

Q: Have you ever wished you hadn't done this?

A: I have never had a moment of despair. I think I am fairly intuitive and I see the universe as the provider of all things that happen. The minute I decided to do this everything started falling into place--the universe is overflowing with gifts and I am a most grateful and fortunate recipient.

Q: Is there a man in our life?

A: No and right now I have neither time nor interest.

From my observations in our walk through the market I think she is both right and wrong. She has no time, perhaps no interest either, but there are and will be many men in her life.

Visit Le Lavandin's site: <http://www.lavandinprovence.com>

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