

Var Village Voice

WEDDINGS IN PROVENCE

APRIL 2007

Just the words "A Wedding in Provence" conjure up exactly the sort of fairytale ambiance that any Bride-to-be wishes for her wedding - her big day. And indeed Provence does offer exactly everything any Bride could wish for. Starting of course with the weather, blues skies and sunshine practically guaranteed, with fairytale landscapes of rolling vineyards garlanded with lonely cypresses, to wonderful small romantic chapels, worthy of Romeo and Juliet, to superb wine Chateaux with parks, gardens, and historic vaulted reception venues.

The choice of venues is huge, from wine chateaux of varying size, to luxury hotels and restaurants up and down the Var, to more modest venues at friendly farm type establishments. What more could a bridal couple want. With lower prices on wine, champagne, loads of budget airlines flying into the region, plus a huge choice of reasonably priced accommodation, it's not surprising that so many couples are finding Provence the perfect solution.

The cover couple pictured above are very representative of why so many young people are choosing the Var for their Big Day of celebration. Both are English, they live and work in Switzerland, and their friends from college and home now are scattered all over the world. As the Bride's mother lives part-time in the Var, following VVV's article on the subject last year, they realised what a perfect solution it offered.

They had a small intimate civil ceremony elsewhere, but the big celebration, with a Humanist Blessing right here in Entrecasteaux, their friends flew in from Buenos Aires, South Africa and the UK, and it all worked perfectly.

PLANNING

However any happy couple, or their parents or grandparents, have to get down to serious planning, preferably a year ahead of when they would like the happy event, the more planning and research carried out well ahead of time, the better the event will be. Apart from anything else they need to warn their friends and loved ones, who may then be able to book their flights - well out of season, so as to get the best rates! They need to do the research on booking a church at least a year ahead, if they have a church blessing in mind, plus booking the venue, to make sure the one they have selected is free. Once they have selected the most appropriate venue, then most other factors start to fall in place.



When one talks costings, for any venue, it is literally is 'as long as a piece of string' it totally depends on what you want included, or not - the menu, cocktails, canapés, wedding cake or not, room rental, open bar, and overnight stay. One has to ask every question in the book. For any bride or groom's mother, grandmother or other responsible person planning the wedding, if they have either military or catering experience, it will stand them in good stead. Plan, plan, plan, make every list you can think of, and as Professional Wedding Planner Sharon Ashton-Sirot says (see her comments below), double and triple check everything.

Do you want a venue that has its own caterer, or would you want to bring in your own caterer, and just rent the venue? Remember, if you are renting from a wine domaine, they not unnaturally will insist on supplying their own wines. So you should make sure you like their wine.

When finally you have a pretty good idea of your budget, the area of choice, and the venues and/or caterers you have winnowed out as the most suitable, then someone should go round tasting and dibbling into the wine/menus on offer to see if they meet your requirements, this is a wonderful job for parents or grandparents and invaluable.

A PROFESSIONAL PLANNER'S ADVICE

I asked Sharon - experienced Wedding Planner, of Sunflower Events, who had organised the Entrecasteaux event, and even now is working on another at Barbaroux Golf - what sort of advice she would give to anyone planning a wedding in the region.

"My advice for anyone planning a wedding in Provence is to insist upon receiving written confirmation from ALL suppliers whether it be the marquee rental company, the celebrant, the hair stylist, photographer, classic car rental company or other. For the more expensive budget items such as the venue and caterer, a written contract should be signed with each of them and receipts received for any deposits paid.

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It is then vitally important to stay in contact with all of your suppliers on a regular basis to reiterate your wishes and maintain their level of involvement (and avoid double bookings)!. If the contracts are drafted in French be sure to have a native French speaker look them over for you before signing anything.

The countryside in Provence is idyllic from Spring through to Autumn and so many couples choose to get married outdoors. If you choose an outdoor venue, be sure to think of a contingency plan just in case of inclement weather. This could be a room within the venue which is blocked for you or it could be a marquee with walls that you are able to close.

Should you choose to have your reception at a more personal/unique venue, for example, at your parent's home or a friend's home, do not consider this an easy or a more economical option. You will actually find that this type of wedding often works out more expensive than a chateau or a vineyard. The reason being that you need to take into consideration the following items that would not be necessary at a regular venue: hiring of tables and chairs, marquee rental with parquet floor, porta loos, outdoor lighting and additional electricity for the caterer and band/DJ etc. Other considerations can include providing a minibus service to bring your guests to and from the house, ensuring you have sufficient parking space and warning your neighbours in advance of the additional noise!

VENUES

It's hard not to rush off into superlatives when talking about the venues to be found in this lovely landscape – just a trawl through some of the wine chateaux websites, gives one a picture of entrancing places to rent, from one end of the Var to the other. The choice is huge from the Luxury hotels of St. Tropez, to wonderful wine Chateaux that dot the countryside, but also there is wide choice of some wonderful smaller family run establishments, hotels, and restaurants and pleasant wine domaines throughout the Var countryside.

Luxury is easy, and the skies the limit. Think the Byblos and Messardiere hotels offering every facility and superb views over the bay of St. Tropez, after all they are the heart of the St. Tropez 'Gold Coast', offering the flesh pots of the town, plus trendy night life for the guests, discos, plus proximity to the trendy and glitzy beach side restaurants of Club 55, Pearl Beach, and Tahiti at the Pampelonne beach. Nothing could be easier.

However there is a slight downside to St. Tropez, all season, which is the difficulty of getting there along the coast road, the N98, as traffic comes to a total stop grinding inch by inch along in the heat, only to arrive and find all the parkings full. This can happen even at the beginning of October, conflicting with the big yacht meet, the Voiles de St. Tropez.

For millionaires this actually poses little problem, as they can fly their guests in by helicopter, landing them at La Mole, just behind St. Tropez. There is also the very lovely Belle Epoque hotel the Beauvallon, just below Ste. Maxime, with staggeringly beautiful views of the Bay of St. Tropez, which boasts a very nice seaside restaurant (with private tunnel under the dreaded N98 coast road) from which one can take their water taxi in to St. Trop!. The Beauvallon also boasts one

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of the best chefs in the region, Michel Belin, whose tasteful food, with added Thai fusion elements is a total delight, but rather up there in the luxury bracket.

For those with a private plane, there is also the very pleasant Hotel at Le Castellet, just above St. Cyr, that offers the facilities of a small private airport, all attached to the Paul Ricard Formula 1 race track, where said millionaires can play around racing their Ferraris. Rooms and suites are around the €400 mark and their Chef Nicolas Sale, 1 star in the Michelin, can cater for parties of 100.

For luxury establishments consult the Var Club Prestige website at: www.provencevarprestige.com

ARRIERE PAYS

Considerations of traffic and access provide an excellent reason for choosing a venue in the picturesque forested and vineyard laden 'arriere pays', rather than subject one's wedding party to battling summer tourist traffic on the coast.

Chateau de Berne in Lorgues, and Chateau Ste. Roseline, in Les Arcs, host many weddings of the region throughout the season, which runs from April through to October - note that most hotels of the region are shut between October and April.

To start with Chateau de Berne, www.chateauberne.com wine domaine, offers a luxury Auberge with 19 rooms (€250-810), the Bacchus room in the main building, which can cater for 180, the Salle Vendanges, with room for 50, plus the Rose Terrace for cocktails next to the Auberge, and a very charming outside facility, the Jasmin Garden (requires a supplement), with marquee protection, set in pine trees overlooking the domaine. Right now Berne are offering a special deal for Weddings in April or May with 30% off the venue rental.

Guests at the Berne Auberge (special offers are available for wedding parties), have a fitness salon, spa and gym, plus pool of course and other outside sports, like quadding through the vineyard at their disposition, easy access to several of the excellent golf courses around this area, plus if guests want to stay on over after their particular wedding event, there are cookery and wine courses on offer, and other entertainments. There is even a helipad for visitors. And, a great plus point, Berne has a small fleet of people carriers, wonderful for picking up guests from the Airport, or down to town to for the evening to taste the delights of Bruno's famed truffle restaurant, or perhaps to sample the delights of the local market.

Classical and jazz evening entertainments happen regularly at the Chateau all through the season, so although this is deep Var countryside life is far from dull.

A sample menu for a Saturday evening Wedding celebration for 100 guests during the season is approximately €116 p.p. (including €1500 for rental, appetizers, €62 menu, drinks bar, with a rather nice gift of the wedding night (value €410) free for the wedding couple. The Total bill being 11.600 = 116 per person. Contact Celine at Berne, via culture@chateauberne.com

Chateau de Berne, a fairly modern wine domaine, is very popular with VVV readers and their families, and numerous expatriate weddings have taken place here in the past few years.



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Chateau Ste. Roseline, in Les Arcs – www.sainte-roseline.com on the other hand is one of the most historic old wine domaines of the region, it's origins going back to Mediaeval times. The Chapel houses remains of Sainte Roseline, local martyr, plus some rather nice paintings, including a Modigliani. Situated in the convenient axe of the autoroute, N7 and close to Les Arcs station, it, like Berne is within very easy reach of Nice Airport, which is approximately one hour's drive. TGV trains stop at les Arcs, however to date the Les Arcs Station does not yet have rental car facilities.



Sainte Roseline Cloisters

Sainte Roseline offers two wonderful inside Wedding reception areas with outside cocktail areas, the Salle des Barriques (with views of the wine maturing in barrels) and the Cloisters outside for 150 people, (actually this salon can seat 200), or the Salle des Vendanges, with the adjacent Plane Tree alley, for 220 (to 350) people.

Their Salle des Barriques is totally impressive, built long ago of stone and small brick, it has huge stone fireplaces at either end of the vast salon and a vaulted ceiling, together with wall mural. One can troll round this vast wine estate via the website to find out how beautiful it all is. The Plane Tree alley, dating back some several hundred years, can also hold a pretty impressive number of people seated. And the Cloister, next to the Chapel affords a very charming gravelled outside courtyard for cocktails before the reception dinner.

Rentals of the two Salons vary from 2,700 to 3,000 euros, depending on whether one has their Caterer or not. A sample costing for a party of 80, including cocktails, dinner (menu at 75 euros per person), wine, and room rental comes to 9.026 euros, approximately 113 euros per person. Contact Laurence Molle at Sainte Roseline e:laurence.molle@sainte-roseline.com

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That's two of the majors in the region, but there are a host of others, all offering widely varying facilities.

Chateau St. Julien D'Aille just outside Vidauban, so named after a Roman soldier martyr, also within close striking distance of Les Arcs Station, and just off the Autoroute the A8, has just built a new, fully equipped wedding reception Salon, to seat 200, and refurbished it's historic Chapel, which now seats 80. This domaine looks out over its own rolling hectares to the Maures mountains. www.saintjuliendaille.com

Chateau Saint Martin, in Taradeau, just down the road from Les Arcs Station, a lovely 18th century bastide, sheltered by old plane trees, offers reception facilities for up to a 100 people. Its historic cellars, dating back to Roman times has a Son & Lumiere version of the domaines history for visitors.

The domaine of Chateau Font du Broc, also in les Arcs, can offer several large reception salons, with outside cocktail areas. Font du Broc was used by several VVV expatriate families from the neighbouring region for weddings in the past two years very successfully.

Les Domaines Bunan at La Cadiere D'Azur, twenty minutes from Toulon has wedding reception facilities, and according to VVV's own wine critic, some of the best wine in the region, www.bunan.com. Then there is the Chateau des Anglades, just outside Hyeres, www.lesanglades.com with its lovely avenue of palm trees.

Look at the Cotes de Provence Syndicat website for a useful listing of wine domaines, and websites, which covers the whole Var at www.vinsdeprovence.com

GOLF VENUES

One should not forget the several excellent Golf course venues scattered around the region. There is St. Endreol Golf Course, one of the most picturesque in the area, with its own hotel, restaurant and reception facilities, plus a very good fitness spa, at La Motte, (nearest autoroute peage is le Muy), where guests can enjoy wonderful golf after all the festivities, including the legendary 13th hole, nearly totally surrounded by water.

Barbaroux Golf Course, close to Brignoles (autoroute peage) offers very reasonable reception facilities at its restaurant. The Nans les Pins Golf Course also has a Hotel Restaurant, La Dolce Fregate, at La Cadiere D'Azur has a superb restaurant and reception facilities, plus staggering views out over the Mediterranean, and the Taulane Golf Course, a La Martre, high in the hills just on the Var/Alpes Maritime border also houses a Hotel and Restaurant. In the luxury class there is Terres Blanches at Tourettes, with it's Four Seasons Hotel and two golf courses.

HOTELS & RESTAURANTS.

The grand three star hotel at St. Maximin, the Hotellerie le Couvent Royal of St. Maximin dates back to the 1279, it houses the remains of St.Mary Madgalene, and for centuries was run by the Dominican monks. Now a luxury hotel its refurbishment was finished in 2003. It offers reception facilities in its Grand Refectory for up to 300 people and the summer cloisters can accommodate 600. Menus on offer range from 73 to 107 euros. Cocktail buffet from 29 to 42 euros, Brunch 30 euros, with 67 bedrooms ranging in price from 80 to 140 euros, and package deals for wedding receptions.



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One should not forget also the Hostellerie of Abbaye La Celle, just outside Brignoles, run by the legendary Alain DuCaisse, nor the Hotel Restaurant les Gorges du Pennafort, at la Motte, not far down the road from the St. Endreol Golf Course.

OTHER VENUES

A dedicated events venue is that of La Magnanerie (Old Silk Mill) of St. Isadore, just outside Hyeres, which offers splendid facilities, and fairy tale surroundings. The Chateau at Vins sur Caramy, just outside Brignoles, has a lovely courtyard for cocktail parties, plus rooms for receptions - classical musical events are staged here towards the end of the summer, as they are also at La Celle Abbaye, Brignoles.

The Chateau Mentone, just outside the tiny village of St. Antonin has recently been totally refurbished and offers wedding facilities for 200, with a few B & B rooms from 95 to 115 euros. Chateau Mentone also has a tiny private Chapel, one which would delight any Romeo and Juliet.

Not far away is the Domaine des Planes, at Rocquebrune sur Argens, offering modest reception facilities for 50 people, with an outside terrace cocktail area for around 60, but which also has accommodation in several rental properties on the domaine for around 30 people.

There are also a number of smaller domaines that offer catering facilities plus accommodation. A friendly farm like domaine is that of Domaine de la Fouquette at Les Mayons (can seat 60), and the Abbaye Ste. Hilaire, near Ollieres.

Then there are small individual venues to be found like the Chambres D'Hotes Lei Chambris, hard by Salernes in a delightful tree shaded valley, bordered by streams, which has plenty of space for tents, and parking, and can organise a small

wedding, plus offering some accommodation with pool.

It's quite a good idea to consult the caterers in the region, who can suggest venues they use. Have a look at their websites listed at the end.

ACCOMMODATION

Cost savings can be made on accommodation as the region is dotted with loads of very pleasant Chambres D'Hotes, so it is sensible when deciding on the venue to look also at what is on offer in the immediate area, so that guests have the least possible distance to travel. Look at the VVV website at www.varvillagevoice.com which lists not only some very nice B & B's, many of them English run, but also loads of very useful villa rentals. A villa rental for a family might be an excellent accommodation solution, and cost saving, plus allowing them to take a bit of a holiday either side of the actual wedding.

Another good website for finding B & Bs around the region is www.likhom.com/anglais. And obviously canvas all one's friends in the region.

LEGALITIES & RELIGION

In France, only the Civil Wedding, performed by the Maire, or his Adjoint, at the Mairie, is legally binding, Church ceremonies are totally optional. If you wish to get married under French law, at least one of the couple must have resided in the commune in which they wish to be married, for a minimum 40 days before the wedding, the banns being displayed outside the Mairie ten days before the marriage. French law also requires blood tests. Apart from maybe not qualifying under the residency requirement - although it is

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possible (not certain) that a local Mairie might wave conditions for part time inhabitants - on the whole expatriates prefer to have the civil (legal) ceremony elsewhere due to French inheritance laws.

Wedding blessings are very possible here in the Var, and Church of England and Humanist contacts are listed at the end. But whether Church of England, Catholic or other, allow plenty of time, one to book the celebrant, church or chapel, two, even if one or both parties are Catholic, it will still take some time to compile a dossier to send to the Bishop.



Two Berne Expatriate Weddings



FLOWERS

There are plenty of good florists in the region, after all Hyeres, down on the coast is one of the major production centres for cut flowers, which are flown all over Europe, so they have the choice of just about anything you could want.

But it could also be a very good idea to talk to your local village market flower man. Robert, from whom I have been buying flowers for years in Lorgues market, when asked told me "Yes of course, we do Weddings - the whole bit, car, church, bouquet, flowers for the table, everything you want." "Have a look at our book." His assistant, family of course, was putting together yet another presentation bouquet for a regular client. He, like all other market flower men, goes to the Hyeres flower market greenhouses before dawn, to get the best of the crop, and his lilies that I buy regularly usually last at least two weeks (in central heating!)

You can contact **Robert Licari**, from La Crau, on 04 94 57 41 21. He can be found at the Lorgues and Le Luc markets and possibly others. But also try your own market man.

BUDGET FLIGHTS & TRANSPORT

There are numerous budget airlines flying into the region. From the UK - Easyjet, to Nice & Marseille, Ryanair, to Toulon & Marseille, Jet2, Globespan, BMI Baby from the Midlands and Scotland to Nice, and now Flybe from Southampton to Nice.

Sterling from Scandinavia to Nice, Flynordic from Sweden to Toulon, and Transavia from Holland to Toulon. Book flights early, and it is just possible that one could make a block booking with Easyjet. See VVV website for full details.

Taxis can be a bit of a problem in rural areas, finding enough to cope with large numbers, and one has to take rural roads into consideration, with less traffic, but sometimes they are hard on normal (low slung) cars. People carriers, or mini coaches if one can find them, tend to be the best solution to ferrying guests to and from the event - all so that people can enjoy themselves without worrying about drink/driving - see the companies listed below

USEFUL CONTACTS & WEBSITES.

CHURCH OF ENGLAND.

Revd. Canon Ben Eaton, St. John's Church, **St. Raphael**.

04 94 40 48 61 www.sjevar.com e: Revbeaton@aol.com

Father Peter Massey, **Lorgues**.

04 94 73 93 37, www.arc-en-provence.com

E: oasis@themasseys.fr

Sister Cecile, CGA Prasada, **Montauroux**.

Tel: 04 94 47 74 26. E. cga.prasada@wanadoo.fr

HUMANIST

British Humanist Association, 1 Gower Street, London WC1 6HD. 020 70 79 3582 E: info@humanism.org.uk

www.humanism.org.uk Mags Allison, 44 Glenwood Road, London N15 3JU. 020 8245 4372. e: mags.allison@virgin.net

LUXURY HOTELS & RESTAURANTS

GOLF RESORTS & WINE DOMAINES

www.provencevarprestige.com

Maison des Vins, Les Arcs, Wine Chateaux & Domaines of the region: www.vinsdeprovence.com.

www.chateauberne.com

www.sainte-roseline.com

www.domaine-de-chateaneuf.com

www.chateau-taulane.com

www.hotelfp-saintmaximin.com

www.chateau-fontdubroc.com

www.saintjuliendaille.com

www.domainedelafouquette.com

www.lamagnanerie-france.com

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