



# French Connection

*Retracing the footsteps of a beloved author, our writer separates fact from fiction in the sensual, sun-drenched back roads of southern France*

STORY BY RYAN MURDOCK PHOTOGRAPHY BY ANITA KRAJNC



# The

sun cast a muted grey glow on the craggy Alpine peaks far below as I made my way from Sweden to Marseille. The deep folds of their valleys, the hidden shadows and barely glimpsed villages put me in a pensive frame of mind. As my eyes probed their dimmest corners, my mind leafed through reams of yellowed documents, the musty old books I'd scanned line by line, and the Internet sites I'd clicked through until my eyes ached. I sat back in my seat and plugged in my iPod, and I let my mind wander more freely over the nature of my quest.

I was searching for the traces of a dead man—hoping to commune with his ghost. My goal for this trip through the back roads of southern France was to seek out locations from Lawrence Durrell's fiction and places associated with his life. At the airport, I was met by my friends Anita and Alja, who had driven all day from Slovenia to join me in my search. There was barely enough room in the back seat of their tiny red car for me and my notebook. It was crammed full of jumbo-sized chocolate bars, fruit, bottles of water and maps: a fully stocked larder for a major road trip. They'd come because Provence in autumn was difficult to resist. But they would soon be drawn into my quest, sifting through clues like detectives and chasing down the barest hint of a rumour.

We left Marseille in a rush-hour traffic jam, the sun hitting the Mediterranean Sea like shattered glass and bouncing off the grimy white stucco of the walls, while on the road motorcycles passed between cars like angry bees, and on the sidewalk everyone seemed to be walking dogs. I caught my first sight of the Rhône at Arles, standing at the top of a set of concrete steps by the riverbank with the mouldering copper of the Roman amphitheatre at our backs. The sound of cars had been replaced by the ebb and tide of murmuring conversation. The life of early evening was the life of the cafés: a *pastis* (the traditional drink of the south) among friends at a sleepy sidewalk table beneath the acacia trees, and then a glass of rosé with a meal of lamb.

"So who is Lawrence Durrell?" Anita asked, as the damp weedy smell of the river filled our nostrils, "And what's your obsession with him?"

"He was a great writer with a poet's eye for landscape," I replied. "A literary romantic in a world where such sentiments were dying out." I picked up a handful of water-smoothed stones and tossed them into the evening-dark Rhône as I thought about how to continue. "At first, as a writer, I was amazed by the richness of his prose. Then, as a traveller, I came to envy his amazing life."

Born in colonial India in the foothills of the Himalayas but sent to boarding school in England, Durrell hated the buttoned-up lifestyle of the north. When his father died he saw an opportunity to escape. Somehow, by some incredible art of persuasion, he convinced his mother to pack up their entire family—four children, of which he was the eldest—and move them all to the Greek island of Corfu.

They lived a crazy island life with eccentric locals and writers dropping by—people like Freya Stark and Patrick Leigh Fermor—and during all those years Durrell plugged away in a little stone house on the side of a mountain and taught himself to write.

"I respected that about him. That he was self-taught and

**OPENING PAGE:** The hilltop village of Gordes dominates the surrounding Luberon.

**OPPOSITE:** Whiling away the afternoon in Sommières.

that he had an eccentric take on life. In the end, he never went back to Britain. He was an expatriate all his life. An outsider." I paused. "I guess I've always felt that way, too."

"But if Durrell hung out in Greece," she asked, "then what are we doing in France?"

I tossed one last stone into the river and brushed the dust off my palms. "Durrell lived the last two decades of his life in a village called Sommières," I replied, "in the Languedoc. During that time he also wrote a novel sequence—*The Avignon Quintet*—set in nearby Provence. Many of those locations still exist. I think we should be able to find them."

I wanted to walk some of those same streets and avenues just to be there, it was true. But I also wanted to see if any trace of Durrell remained. Because if it didn't—if the work could fade away as easily as the person—what did that mean for my own literary aspirations?

## *The Camargue*

The next morning we followed the Rhône into the desolate salt pans and waving grasses of the Camargue 100 kilometres west of Marseille where, as the poet Mistral wrote, "weary after so much journeying, it slows like a pulse" before finding its communion with the sea. Water would be our constant companion throughout the journey. We were always coming back to it.

The land unrolled before us in a long straight line, its skies broken by flights of ducks with a sound like rusty oars, and pink flamingos and wild geese. Eagles, pelicans and buzzards pecked at its broad curving beaches, and wild boars snuffled in its undergrowth.

From time to time, the flat horizon was broken by the iconic silhouette of a *gardian*, the famous "cowboy" of the Camargue, with his flat black hat, leather chaps and tall boots. He sat astride one of the small white horses—swift and mettlesome—that inhabits the region. Born dark brown or black, it turns white around its fourth year, as though it had gradually absorbed and was expressing the salt of the land.

Small farmhouses—traditional *mas*—were tucked back from the road, sheltered by plane trees. Their walls were low and white, windowless, curved at the north end for protection against the howling mistral wind, and their roofs were thatched with reeds. These natural materials melded the mas to the land as though they had grown there, just like the massive crops of rice and the piles of shimmering salt.

When the road finally ran out, we drifted into the seaside town of Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer, where the odours of sand and sea overpowered those of thyme and rosemary bruised by flocks of sheep. Legend has it that a group of travellers from the Levant washed up on that same lonely shore around 40 AD, including Mary Jacobé (sister of the Virgin Mary), Saint Mary Magdalene, and Lazarus of resurrection fame, along with their Egyptian servant Sara. After their deaths, the two Marys gained a cult following among newly Christianized gypsies, and the church that was built there became a place of pilgrimage: the spiritual headquarters of the gypsies of all Christendom.

The little fortified Church of Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer, and its gypsy festival, was the site of an important scene in Durrell's *The Avignon Quintet*, and the first location in his world to take on physical life for me. Just as some people orient their lives by Ellis Island or Ankor Wat, these places were my interior reference points, landmarks in the geography of my reading. It wasn't exactly a pilgrimage, but I did experience that strange sense of diplopia, when a thing that has lived in your imagination suddenly enters the tangible world.

Inside, the walls were rough-hewn stones, and the windows

*“The heart of [Provence] is Avignon, with its honey-coloured, rose-faded walls and machicolated towers rising steeply from a country dusted silver with olives.”*

—Lawrence Durrell

were narrow utilitarian slits at the top, much like the arrow slits of a fortress. The light—cool and subterranean—filtered down on me as though between lily pads into the depths of a pond. Sitting there in a pew, I felt as though I had drowned. All was stillness and shafts of light and I was overcome by a deep sense of peace. The ceiling far above was the world of air that I had left.

Water is a recurring symbol in the *Quintet*, as it was in Durrell's own life. In his Greek island youth, it symbolized both freedom and escape, but in his later solitary years beside the flood-prone Vidourle in Sommières, it created a sense of vulnerability. Was there a message in that transformation for me as well? Did freedom and escape become vulnerability in the end?

### Pont du Gard

After spending the night in a sprawling old hostel in the middle of the Camargue—empty at that time of year—we hit the back roads to Avignon, armed with a book by the painter Paul Hogarth, who had tracked down and painted these same sites nearly 20 years before. The appended “artist's notebook” would be invaluable in helping us to separate the still extant from the sadly vanished.

I requested a detour to the Pont du Gard, 25 kilometres west of Avignon in the region of Languedoc-Roussillon. Durrell, an avowed classicist, regarded it as “the noblest Roman monument in the world.” This imposing aqueduct, which spans the valley of the Vers-Pont-du-Gard, was the tallest bridge the Romans ever built, and its very structure reflected that purely Roman sentiment: “It is beautiful because it is useful.” Unlike the Greeks who pursued beauty for beauty's sake, the Romans were consummate administrators, cynical and slyly precise. They found aesthetic beauty in function.

We chose to eat our lunch beneath the bridge, on some rocks by the water. We passed around a baguette, tearing off great hunks with a spray of crumbs, and breaking pieces off

the wedge of hard tangy cheese that a shop lady had carefully wrapped in crinkly waxed paper. In between bites, we dipped into the plastic container of olives—the very fruit of Provence—and their oil coated our fingers, leaving behind a glassy sheen. I gazed across the river at our other reason for being there: the towering stone bulk of the Auberge des Aubergines—the rather eccentric *fin-de-siècle* lodge, which was the site of an important closing scene from *Livia*, the second novel of Durrell's *Quintet*. To my dismay, it didn't look anything like his description of it, and I suffered a brief moment of doubt.

After a nap on sun-warmed rocks we trudged up to the ruins, where our morale was soon restored. A shift in perspective made all the difference. From above I was able to get a glimpse into the courtyard of the Auberge, just like the characters in *Livia* who had come to spy on Prince Hassan's wild bacchanal from the heights of the darkened aqueduct. It sat slightly below us, exactly as Larry described it: “a strange, rambling old place [...] buried in plane-shade, leaning practically over the green water.” Even surrounded by tourists as we were, it was easy to imagine the party. We chalked that find up as a definite success.

### Avignon

“The heart of [Provence] is Avignon,” Durrell wrote, “with its honey-coloured, rose-faded walls and machicolated towers rising steeply from a country dusted silver with olives.” The city was the geographical focal point of *The Avignon Quintet*, and so we decided to spend several days there. We liked the town, and the thrill of tracking down the places described by Durrell never failed to fascinate us.

Your first glimpse of Avignon is likely to be the parched crenellations of the 14th-century Palais des Papes, which sits at the heart of the original walled town. The palace was built in the beginning of the 14th century when the French-born Pope Clement V fled the papal power struggles in Rome. His flight began a period of 70 years in which Avignon ruled Christendom under seven successive popes. While the palace's original section was austere, the second, larger addition was flamboyant and ornate. Its treasures and rich tapestries reveal the obvious wealth and hypocrisy of an organization that purported to aid the poor while wallowing in a life of gluttony, decadence and corruption.

Despite the marvels of its maze of rooms, it's impossible to admire the values that it represented. Under the harsh light of day, standing dwarfed beneath sheer towering walls before a door seemingly designed to make you feel small, the palace looms over you with a sense of weighty guilt. Durrell referred to it as a “hideous packing-case of an uncouth ugliness,” and “Christianity's graveyard.” We decided that it was a site best seen in profile, preferably by moonlight, when nighttime dulls the reality of history.

Later that first afternoon, wandering the Balance Quarter, we stumbled upon the Hôtel d'Europe. The antique-filled 16th-century mansion had been a hotel for more than 200 years, and had played host to Napoleon, Lamartine, Victor Hugo and John Stuart Mill. Durrell described it as “the finest, not the grandest, hotel in Europe.” No matter how precarious his personal fortunes, when travelling by car between Greece and England before the war he always tried to scrape up the money to stay there. Its hallways and rooms exuded those simple qualities that soothe the soul—a particular type of silence, deep carpeting, and the smell of old wood—and I understood why he liked it so much.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: A caffeine jolt beneath the Palais des Papes' imposing walls; The Hôtel d'Europe, Durrell's haunt in Avignon; A typical *mas* on the outskirts of Lacoste, former residence of the Marquis de Sade; Avignon's famous broken bridge, the Pont St-Bénézet.





We paused in its elegant, shaded courtyard to enjoy a quiet pastis at a wrought-iron table within gurgling distance of the moss-covered fountain. We were served by a beautiful girl in a black dress fringed with delicate white lace who looked remarkably like Audrey Tautou in *Amélie*. Her deep brown eyes held that same dreamy romanticism and a sense of being someplace else, and she reminded me of everything I loved about France.

I sent my business card in to the general manager, who came out to join us. He was fascinated to learn of the hotel's association with Durrell, and especially of its wartime description in the *Quintet*: "the old Europa looked hopelessly unkempt. Its pleasant inner patio was adrift with unswept leaves. Its dim and makeshift lighting arrangements argued a power shortage. Moreover it was unheated."

"At no time was the hotel ever unkempt or run down," he said with a smile. "In fact, during the occupation the officials of the Gestapo stayed here—there were no guests. It was, of course, kept quite opulent for their use."

Throughout our stay in Avignon we were drawn back there again and again. In the evenings we came to sit at a quiet café in the adjacent Place Crillon, where we whiled away the evening over several bottles of Tavel rosé, a favourite of Durrell's, which he described as "that magnificent topaz-coloured wine," and we read passages from the *Quintet*, immersing ourselves in his world.

We uncovered many locations from the novels, but none were as atmospheric as the Rue des Teinturiers. Once the street of cloth dyers, the entire area still breathes a scent of

dampness and stagnant water. According to the *Quintet* "the darkness was like wet velvet" and the stout wooden water wheels of the canal were "forever turning with their slopping and swishing sound." Dimly lit even in daytime, it's still a little seedy: the canal was littered with empty bottles; a window had been smashed; metal shutters were covered in graffiti. The people of the district seemed a little rundown too. It was the perfect setting for the tortured insomniac nighttime wanderings of the character Felix Chatto.

Midway down the street, we found the wrought-iron gate of the Chapel of the Grey Penitents, where the Nazi Von Esslin in Constance secretly searched for a Catholic priest to hear his confession. Inside the dimly lit church, its walls decorated with paintings by Parrocel and Nicolas Mignard, every scrape of a shoe echoed off the cloistered-vault ceiling and seemed to amplify the silence. I sat there for nearly an hour, recalling scenes from the novels and carefully building their atmosphere in my mind. And then a handsome young priest stepped out from the vestry and went about his work tending the chapel. With his good looks and the evident temptation into which they would lead him, he seemed like a character cast right out of Durrell. The parallel was so uncanny that I gave an involuntary shudder. Beneath the muttered prayers and the ringing of the sacristy bell, I heard a sound that could only be the chuckle of Larry's ghost.

### Sommières

For Durrell, the foods and wines of southern France were inextricably tied to the land: they "worked their way into the

landscape, so that my memories of it are shot through with the prismatic glitter of them." And so, in his honour, we took time out from our quest to venture north to the fabled vineyards of Châteauneuf-du-Pape for a tasting, fully realizing that we are all students when it comes to the vine and the only true teacher is Bacchus himself.

It was there, with the autumn snip of secateurs in the background, that we encountered "the crooked bottle," an arch-nemesis I'd thoroughly routed with an old friend two winters before. The coincidence was astonishing: of all the wineries in all of France, I had to walk into that one. In spite of a questionable memory of my last encounter with this uniquely shaped vessel, as Durrell would have assured us, the vintage it contained proved to be quite fine.

Fortified by rich wine that was the colour of dried blood, we turned west into the former province of Languedoc, which now continues in the regions of Languedoc-Roussillon and the Midi-Pyrénées, past the grey-silver leaves of rich olive holdings that shivered in the wind, past chestnut trees and dry stone walls, and shops that were stocked with the sea salt of the Camargue, neat stacks of Marseille soap, Provençal olive oil, and conical piles of delicate lavender.

In the little medieval town of Sommières, 22 kilometres

**OPPOSITE LEFT:** L'Espace Lawrence Durrell in Sommières.

**ABOVE:** The shuttered and gloomy mansion in which Durrell spent his last decades.

**RIGHT:** "Follow the alleyway off the plaza to find the rooms Henry Miller rented."

north of Nîmes on the River Vidourle, we left the car next to the tall stone wall of the castle halfway up the hill. Durrell had spent the last 24 years of his life in the town, and it was where he died. It would be the most suitable place to end our journey as well, because it was also where his fiction and his life came to meet.

Armed with a simple street map printed off the Internet, we followed a maze of narrow alleyways between stone houses, our footsteps shadowed by a mustard cat. Our first goal was L'Espace Lawrence Durrell, a stone room in a 17th-century convent that reputedly held a permanent exhibition of his work. I'd been led to expect little more than an empty space, with perhaps a single table devoted to Durrell.

I was stumbling along trying to count blocks that were little more than laneways in a claustrophobic canyon of medieval stone when I was stopped dead in my tracks by the face of the writer himself gazing down from a poster draped across a wall. I hadn't expected that.

Inside the room we found table after table of first editions dusted with plaster from the crumbling ceiling. The walls were hung with old photos of Durrell—his life in Sommières, his youth in Greece, an older version standing beside the camper van in which he roamed Provence. They even had an original of his watercolours, which he exhibited in Paris under the pseudonym Oscar Epfs, and an old vinyl record of him reading some of his poetry. It was so much more than I had ever hoped. But despite these treasures, I had to admit that the last entry in the guestbook was several months old, and the elderly caretaker was alone. Delighted that I had travelled so far simply to see these things, we swapped memories and associations and quoted stories from the author's life, and when closing time arrived she marked the location of Durrell's house on my map.



We ate our lunch beneath the bridge, by the water. We passed the baguette, tearing off great hunks with a spray of crumbs, and breaking off pieces of hard tangy cheese

The big gloomy mansion was easy to find, but it had since been sold and divided into two flats. I stood peering over the metal gate, ringing the bell, hoping to be allowed to just walk around the yard, but no one was home. It looked lonely and empty, still crushed by the loss of Claude, Larry's third wife. Despite the joys and adventures of his Pan-like youth, and despite being remembered as quick to laugh and a witty conversationalist, his later years were lonely ones.

Standing there outside the wall, I realized that Durrell had lived two very different lives: the ideal sort of world that he would have liked to experience, the one he expressed in his books, and the quieter, lonelier life that he actually led. In the end, the life he was able to create didn't match the vision in his head, the vision expressed by his work. But did that necessarily mean that he had failed? Is the sum of a life measured by the people you touch directly, or is it measured by the ripples that you leave behind, which continue to touch life after life long after you're gone? Given the option, which one would you choose?

Lost in thought and feeling a bit melancholy, we paused to photograph the River Vidourle, where a group of old men whiling away the afternoon beneath a plane tree began clowning around for the camera. When Anita turned the lens on them, the whole town opened up to us.

They asked what we were doing there. When I told them we'd come because of Lawrence Durrell, their faces clouded over with concern. "Mais non! Il est mort!" ("But no! He is dead!") I had to laugh, because he had died in 1990. It was as though time moved so slowly here that the outside world might not have heard the news. I reassured them that we were only looking for sites from his life and his work.

"Then you should talk to that man over there," they said, pointing at a stooped grey-bearded man who was mumbling into a pay phone. "He's a painter from Venice. He knew Durrell."

Bruno, a man with broad glasses and a ponytail, spoke English and offered to translate. "You know, I named my daughter Clea



after the character in *The Alexandria Quartet*," he said with a gentle smile. "That and *The Black Book* were my favourites."

As their age-worn memories were gradually rekindled, the associations began to flow:

"That café right over there, that's where Durrell used to go. He would come across the river each day to do his errands, then stop there and drink white wine from a lemonade glass."

"No one in the town could drink with him," another man interjected, "because he could put away so much. And so he often drank alone. The funny thing is, you could rarely tell he'd had a drop."

"He told me once he liked that particular café because if he looked to the right he could see Rome"—the arches of the old Roman bridge—"and if he looked to the left he could see nature"—the green winding banks of the river as it left town.

I had only hoped to find the house, to soak up the atmosphere of the place. I'd never expected to encounter such help. People dialed up friends and thrust mobile phones into my hand, and they gathered over the pamphlets I'd picked up at the exhibition site. Each new photo prompted another animated recollection.

"This one with Anais Nin was taken right over there at that same café."

"Ahh, Henry Miller. He came here to visit Durrell for a few days. He ended up staying six months. Go back to the main square beyond the town clock and look for the alley on the left.

**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:** Durrell's favourite Sommières cafe—Rome to the left, nature to the right; Grapes grow from every available space in Roussillon; De Sade's ruined château at Lacoste offers commanding views of the Luberon.



You can see the flat he rented."

They were proud of their town and proud to show off its famous associations, but apart from Bruno they knew little of the man, and none of them had read his work. In his later years, Durrell was a private person who shunned fame and recognition: "the hermit of Sommières." He simply kept to himself. Still, those stories mattered to me. Having seen the house and those streets and having talked to those men, I could envision his life here. It was enough.

That night we decided to splash out on a celebratory meal. It was more than we could afford, but it was the kind of slap in the face of prudence that Durrell would have approved of. We laid the foundation with pastis, its bite of anise designed to stimulate our hunger and to reopen the gates of conversation. After we'd dealt with a delicate soupe au pistou, out came a succulent coq au vin that fairly slid off the bone, accompanied by fresh crusty bread and roasted potatoes, and two litres of a firm and somewhat spicy pic saint loup. We closed the proceedings with the finest crème brûlée I had ever eaten—rich and creamy, with a crust like hardened magma upon which to rap your spoon. The atmosphere was so cordial that we decided to linger there for a glass of Armagnac, the finest brandy in the world, the very fumes of which seemed to turn every stranger in the room into a friend—though a couple more would have blown us out like a candle.

Our bellies warmed and our spirits bursting, we set out into

**OPPOSITE:** The time of evening *pastis* in the cafés of Sommières.

**ABOVE:** The bustling café district of Avignon's Place de l'Horloge.

the nighttime streets in search of more wine. Most places were closed, but we found one man who agreed to sell us a bottle of the delicate local rosé, which he uncorked for us and which we carried through the empty streets.

"Let's go back for one last look at the house," I said. We'd been unable to get in, and despite our successes something was still missing. I still felt shut out.

We high-stepped our way around the entire perimeter of the tall stone wall, crashing through the weeds of the adjacent empty lot to see it from all sides. At the back, hidden from the road, I hauled myself up for a glimpse into the yard. None of the windows were lit; it was dark and lonely. On impulse I took a swig of wine and threw away the cork. Unwilling to leave the town with regrets, I climbed carefully over the sharp iron spikes without tearing my pants or emasculating myself, and I jumped down into the yard. I simply wanted to sit there in silence for a few moments, and to raise a glass with Larry's ghost. He had become simply Larry by then, because we were finally seeing the world through his eyes.

As we walked back through the town arm in arm, singing in booming voices that echoed off the walls, I saw the poster of Larry smiling down at us with the carefree days of his youth resurrected—and I swear to God I saw him wink. ☺

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