

Yoga in Provence

(or in other words) heaven on earth

BY LISA A. HALLEE

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We rose in silence and moved the table and chairs off the stone terrace of the ancient Provençale house to make way for our yoga mats.

"Bon jour, yogis" our leader Kim called as we prepared for our 7 a.m. yoga practice.

"Barely," said Marilyn, stifling a yawn, "I'm barely bon jour."

Our bodies still stiff from sleep, we flowed through sun salutations as best we could. The morning air was cool, belying the coming heat of the day. From our vantage point at the "Guardhouse," located on the edge of town at the village ramparts, the verdant valley stretched out below us, olive trees hugging the hillsides and terra cotta roof tiles of distant villas dotting the distant landscape. The silence was palpable, pierced only by an occasional birdsong. After yoga came a brief meditation, a chance to quiet the mind and breathe before a busy day.

Nine of us made the journey from Maine to the picturesque hillside village of Moustier-Sainte Marie in the Alpes de Haute Provence, France. Now we were diving deeply into an intense seven-day experience. Kim Nashed, a longtime teacher at School Street Yoga, and her partner, John Parsons, a meditation coach, had been planning this trip for nearly two years. Kim led yoga sessions at the beginning and end of each day with a longer session at mid-day. John led meditation at the end of each yoga session. In between, we toured the countryside, ate incredible food, enjoyed local wines, and made new friends.

Most of us had met for the first time in March when, on a frosty night, we trudged through the deep snow to Kim's Waterville home to hear about the trip. After the endless winter we had suffered through, the idea of a trip to a sun-drenched Mediterranean climate was alluring. Kim described activities such as picnicking along the gorge and the lake shores, yoga and meditation in a studio in the town center, hikes to a nearby monastery, and fabulous food and wine, but all I had to hear was "lavender fields in bloom" and I was hooked.

By the end of that evening, my fellow travelers and I had become friends and there was no question that I would make this trip. Three months later we met again in Provence and, in a week, became friends for life. Stephanie, a nurse practitioner and herbalist from Oakland, was traveling with her thirty-year-old daughter, Jessica, who works in fashion in Boston. Marilyn, a retired teacher from Skowhegan, and her husband, Roger, a newly retired physician, were inveterate travelers eager to see a new place. Annie, a retired librarian from Unity was

traveling with her daughter, Hannah, who was living in California. All of us were experienced yogis with the exception of Roger, who enjoyed meditation and was a good sport about yoga.

I had never heard of Moustier-Sainte Marie, but that's not surprising since Provence is a largely rural area with many small towns. The largest city in Provence is Aix de Provence, hardly a household name in the U.S. The largest city in the region is the Mediterranean port of Marseilles. Moustier St. Marie is tucked up in the Southeast corner of France near the Gorge du Verdon. The grand canyon of Europe, the guidebooks say. It doesn't look at all like the Grand Canyon, but it is undeniably beautiful: lush and green with limestone walls and a huge lake, Lac de St. Croix, whose water is colored turquoise by sunlight refracting off glacial sediment.

Moustier was built on a plateau flanked by limestone cliffs hundreds of years ago; the ancient stone buildings, some dating back to the twelfth century, are clustered on narrow cobblestone streets. Cars are not allowed in the town and must be kept in parking lots outside. The terrain is hilly and can be a bit challenging in the mid-day heat but the peace and quiet of a pedestrian-friendly town were well worth it.

Each day featured a jam-packed schedule. Our morning yoga took place at the Guardhouse; for our afternoon and early evening yoga, we escaped the 90 plus degree heat of the day for the coolness of an underground room we dubbed "the cave." The enormous room with its vaulted arched ceiling, stone walls and floor, lies two stories below the main square. Owned by the town, the "cave" has had many uses over the centuries but is now equipped with modern lights, sound, climate control and rest rooms and is used for public meetings. It was a perfect home away from home for us School Streeters.

Aided by our local hosts Pascal and Claire, we visited lavender fields, toured a local winery, hiked to the nearby monastery, Monastere de Segries, swam and kayaked in the cool lake waters and explored the Verdon gorge. One day we drove to a larger village, Riez, for its remarkable farmers' market (marche) and were overwhelmed by the spectacular array of local produce and other wares. We tasted olives of all shapes and sizes, bought apricots, white peaches, melons, radishes, greens, fresh herbs and huge heirloom yellow, green and red tomatoes. We sampled saucisson (thick dried cured sausage made from pork and spices in seemingly endless combinations). We savored local cheeses of all varieties. We adored the pungent local Banon, a goat cheese which is sold wrapped in chest-



Lisa Hallee photo

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Photo by John Parsons

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nut leaves and tied with raffia to last the winter. With us, it didn't last a day. We bought loaves of fresh bread and jars of creamy lavender honey and flavorful local olive oil.

Starved after pondering such succulent food, we met for lunch at a nearby bistro and feasted on lamb chops, whole sea bass stuffed with herbs, beef daube (a rich stew), and gorgeous salads, all washed down with well-chilled Provençal Rosé. I had never tasted French Rosé before this trip but I soon discovered that this was not my mother's Mateus. It was not sweet but dry and with subtle fruit overtones of apricot and pear. Delicious.

Over the week, we ate many meals together. Breakfast and lunch at the Guardhouse, included in the cost of our trip, were expertly prepared by our travel mates, Jessica and Stephanie, and featured a wealth of local produce, cheese, eggs and meat. We ate dinner as a group twice during the week and on other nights we sampled local restaurants on our own.

Our group spanned two generations. Six of us were what the French call "women of a certain age" that most delicate phrase captures this stage of life so well: we are old enough to know what we want (and not care what others think) and young enough to act on our dreams.

As we got to know each other better and the facades to which we bravely cling started to melt away, we discovered that we all shared a common thread – transition. All of us were moving from one role in life to another: caring for aging parents, grieving recent losses, retirement, empty nests, career transitions, marriage, divorce, new parenthood, new grandparenthood. Most of us raised families in central Maine but have adult children who no longer live here. We are forced to travel to where they are to maintain our family ties. Once we connected at this deeper human level, we bonded. Our trip became more than beautiful scenery and luscious food and wine, it became about self-discovery and lasting friendships.

The best news of all came recently. Kim and John will offer this trip again in June 2018 to a maximum of eight participants. I just might be one of them.



Lisa Hallee photos

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