

High Life – February 2019

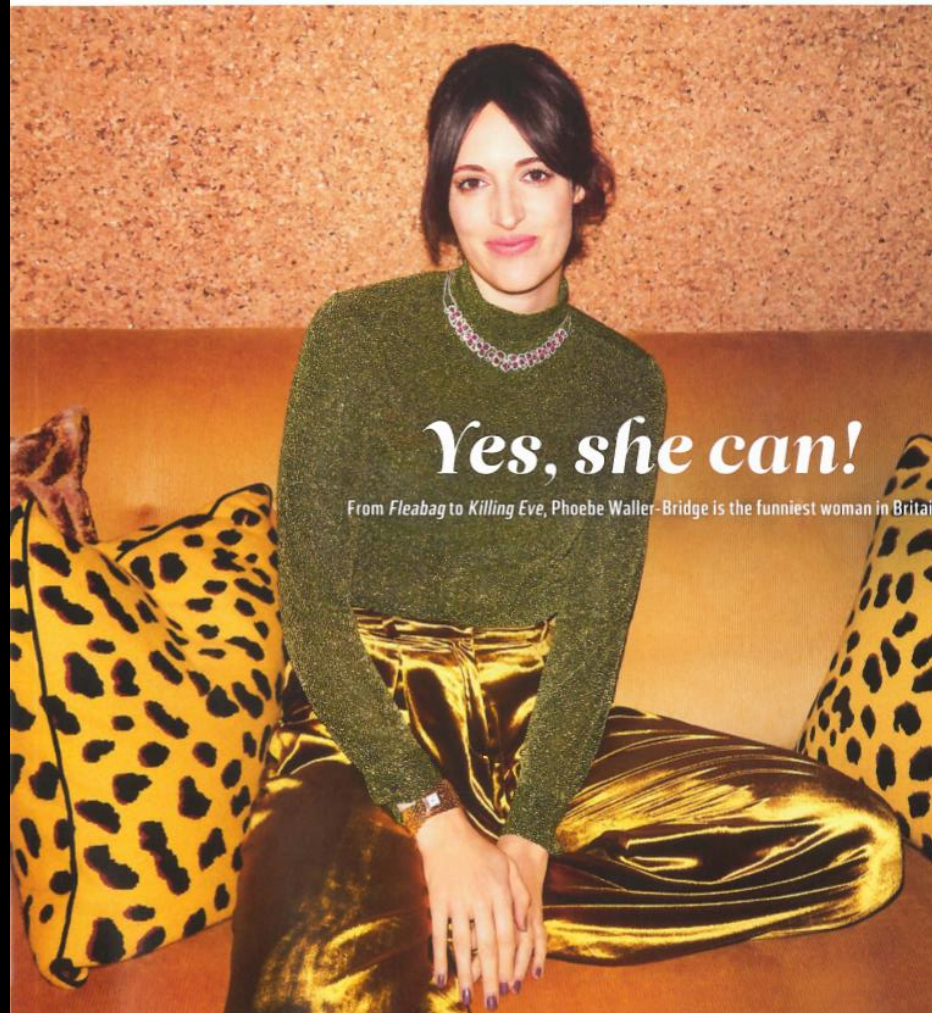
Terre Blanche – PCL Generated

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# HIGH LIFE

The best of February's in-flight entertainment JONATHAN ROSS ON FILM, ELLEN E JONES ON TV AND ANNA CALVI ON MUSIC [page107](#)



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Thirty AGE years



Photographie: Getty Images

In 1987, former ad man and *High Life* contributor Peter Mayle jacked it all in and went in search of the good life in the South of France. His ensuing memoir, published two years later, revolutionised the travel-writing world and inspired thousands of Brits to follow suit.

DESTINATION  
THE BEAUTIFUL SOUTH

in Provence ⊕



LAURA BARTON heads to Provence to find out why three decades on, we're still dreaming of a south-of-France sabbatical and meets the rural-dwelling Brits who are happy to have become an expat trope



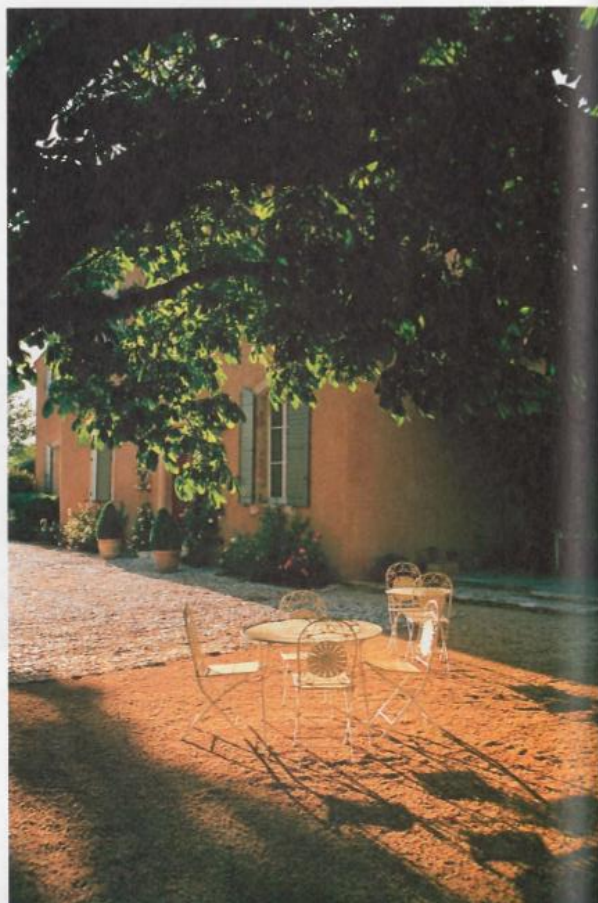
ITS SUCCESS IN  
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TO OUR GREY  
BRITISH LIVES  
- OF WARM DAYS,  
SOFT ROSÉ, AND  
LAVENDER FIELDS

Somewhere among the quiet shelves of Book in Bar, an international bookshop on a backstreet in Aix-en-Provence, lies the root of the matter – a 224-page paperback volume, its cover depicting the faded stucco and charmingly weathered shutters that have become a kind of shorthand for the French rural idyll, and above them a gentle understatement: 'The Worldwide Bestseller'.

It is now 30 years since Peter Mayle's *A Year in Provence* was published. A memoir of how the author and his wife Jennie relocated from Devon to a derelict farmhouse in Ménerbes, a walled hilltop village in the Luberon region, it told of contrary builders, truffle-hunters, goat-racing, and a clarinet-playing plumber. It expounded upon the nuances of French grammar, greetings, intonation, the horror of mistrais, vipers, plasterers. But it also rhapsodised about the region's more sensuous charms – the winter scent of wood smoke, the "lobster mousse, beef en crouste, salad dressed in virgin oil, hand-picked cheeses, desserts of miraculous lightness, digestifs..."

When Mayle died last year aged 78, the book had been translated into 22 languages and sold more than six million copies. Its success in part lay in the fantasy it lent to our grey British lives – of warm days, soft rosé, lavender fields, and a kind of gentleness of time and light and spirit that proved irresistible. It transformed our notions of France and kindled a fervour for all things Provençal that continues to this day – from tapenade to renovation shows, ratatouille and bouillabaisse, and the dream of long, hazy *vacances en gîtes*.

Mayle was a creative director at Ogilvy, an advertising firm. When he left the UK, it was with the intention of writing a novel. Soon, however, he found his eye distracted by the details of his new life – his well-dressed pool cleaner, the



neighbour's donkey, the "ringlets of ham, sausage dusted with herbs and spiced with green peppercorns, tiny, nutty cubes of nougat..." – and wrote about them instead.

That anyone published *A Year in Provence* at all remains a faintly miraculous occurrence. Travel writing in the late 1980s was a different art form, the serious preserve of authors such as Bruce Chatwin, Laurens van der Post and Paul Theroux. Mayle's deal, signed over a long and boozy lunch, was something of a well-lubricated punt by his publisher – one that he is said to have entirely regretted once sobriety returned. Upon publication, only one newspaper bothered to run a review.

In many ways, the book's success might be credited to Mayle's past in advertising. Not since 'Herbes de Provence' was dreamt up by a French spice wholesaler in the 1970s, had the region been marketed so enticingly. By the publication of the paperback, Mayle had charmed bookshop buyers, secured a series of newspaper extracts and acquired his readership by steady persuasion. What he understood, perhaps, is the power of aspiration and that, amid the drudgery of our daily lives, there lies for many a desire not for grand adventure, but for a sweeter, simpler life.

ROSÉ ALL DAY

Mayle once said one of the great joys of life in the South of France was the long lunch, preferably accompanied by several bottles of wine; Ménerbes

The TV adaptation of Mayle's book that followed in 1993, starring John Thaw and Lindsay Duncan, was a critical and ratings failure. In one interview, Mayle said of Thaw, "He was meant to be enjoying himself in beautiful Provence, yet he would sit there on set surrounded by bottles of rosé and look like he wanted to kill himself." However, Ridley Scott's

adaptation of Mayle's novel *A Good Year*, casting Russell Crowe as the curmudgeonly stockbroker who falls in love with a Provençal vineyard and Marion Cotillard, was deemed even worse in 2006, earning dreadful reviews. The critic Deborah Ross christened it 'A Good Yawn'.

"Mr Scott actually has a house nearby," my driver tells me, as we wheel through the countryside to Terre Blanche, a five-star resort in the commune of Tourrettes. It is late spring, and the air is bright and sweet, alive with the scent of pine trees and wild thyme, and the soft burr of cicadas.

"People come here because they want to escape," Sarah Monier, Terre Blanche's communications manager, tells me over dinner at the resort's Michelin-starred restaurant. "They want to find the authentic places, the markets and the old vineyards and the lavender fields – of course, we are also the home of rosé, and we cultivate all the flowers for the historic perfume houses." Perhaps the power of the region relies on its sensory overload: it is at once the taste of local olive oil and the heavy scent of jasmine in Grasse, the hush of cypress trees, the brush of warm skin, pleasures that seem uncomplicated yet intense. "We have the sun all year round," is Monier's gentle explanation. "We concentrate everything."

Naturally, *A Year in Provence* launched a glut of imitators. In essence, Mayle had invented a whole new genre of writing about a place. "Travel writing was often about moving through a place as an outsider," says Stanfords book store's Jude Brosnan. "Mayle introduced a change of pace to the genre with the idea of learning about a new place by planting roots and blending in. He paved the way for lots of writing about uprooting and immersing in a whole new life."

Among those that followed were bestsellers *Under the Tuscan Sun* by Frances Mayes, Chris Stewart's *Driving Over Lemons* and Elizabeth Gilbert's *Eat, Pray, Love*. "The trend is still going strong," says Brosnan. "The Year of Living Danishly: My Twelve Months Unearthing the Secrets of the World's Happiest Country" by Helen Russell has sold particularly well." And readers are not quite ready to leave the dream of France behind. "A Beer in the Loire: One Family's Quest to Brew British Beer in French Wine Country" by Tommy Barnes is getting a lot of interest," she says. ©

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BECAUSE THEY WANT TO  
ESCAPE... AND TO FIND  
THE AUTHENTIC PLACES"



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**DESTINATION**  
THE BEAUTIFUL SOUTH

Mayle himself mined his rich Provençal seam for many years – after the success of *A Year in Provence*, *Toujours Provence*, *Encore Provence* and *Chasing Cézanne*, among many others.

But readers didn't just want to read about escape. With Mayle's encouragement, many upped sticks and sought out a similar good life in rural France. An estimated 12,000 Brits now live in Provence, exerting a steady influence on the region – in the wake of the book, house prices rose, the existing expat community grew ruffled, and soon newcomers began to look beyond Provence for their dream life.

Among them was Janine Marsh, who gave up her job in the City 15 years ago to move to a barn in Northern France with her husband Mark. "It was very cheap," she says, half apologetically. "It cost less than a Hermès handbag." Now a travel writer, Marsh documented the move in her memoir *My Good Life in France* and today her website receives more than a million views per month – a combination of "expats, wannabes and a lot of Americans". Today Marsh describes the move as "the best thing I ever did", though she concedes there were times when she would find herself weeping in the greenhouse, when it was cold and they had no central heating and had run out of wood and the nearest shop was eight miles away.

Still, the appeal of life in rural France is hard to dispute and frequently gastronomical: "There are markets every day of the week, they appreciate the provenance of food, and cakes aren't just cakes, they're like little jewel boxes," Marsh says. She talks of the bread van that visits thrice-weekly, of a neighbour who makes goat's cheese, of another who, at 88, has never been to a supermarket.

Marsh is often contacted by readers seeking Peter Mayle's Provence and she, too, is beguiled by its sunshine and squares, its cuisine and its light. Though she suggests that those wanting to avoid the crowds might also care to consider Occitanie: "It's next to Provence and it gets as much sunshine, but it didn't have Peter Mayle."

Mayle often acknowledged the havoc he had wrought on the region. The first visitor to his door was a gentleman in a BMW who the author invited in and lavished with local wine. He was perhaps less congenial to the hundreds that followed. After a time, he moved away to escape the hordes – first to Amagansett in the Hamptons, but then, missing the sweet smell of thyme in the morning, he returned to the Luberon.

Thirty years have, of course, brought changes to this corner of southern France. Air travel has made it more accessible than ever and, alongside



the devoted Brits, those who visit, Monier says, come from as far afield as Japan, China and Russia. In Aix, not far from Book in Bar, there is now a bubble tea stand and a Starbucks, as well as stalls selling açai bowls.

But still, the pleasures that first drew Mayle here seem to linger. Stand by the clock tower in Fayence and look out over the terracotta rooftops and it is hard to imagine very much has changed here in the past three decades – its pleasures still hold the reassuring weight of time and sense and season: the morning scent of rosemary and marjoram and the sound of the market rising, of church bells pealing somewhere in the valley, of celeriac and truffle velouté being readied in the restaurant below. "The year began with lunch," Mayle started his memoir. Thirty years and six million books later, it seems as fine a way as any to begin a day in Provence. ■

✉ @missbarton

High Life stayed at Terre Blanche. Book rooms from £353 per night, terre-blanche.com

**HOW TO MOVE TO PROVENCE**

**| → | LEARN THE LANGUAGE**

Obvious perhaps, but a surprising number of people do up sticks without learning how to speak French. And how else will you be able to ask the plumber to stop playing the clarinet and come and fix your radiators?

**| → | EAT LOCAL**

The easiest way to understand the culture and rhythms of your new home? Go shopping at the local markets.

**| → | IGNORE THE STEREOTYPES**

Contrary to their reputation the French aren't rude. "They're incredibly polite and don't like to intrude," says Marsh. "But that can be misconstrued."

**| → | FIND AN EXPAT COMMUNITY...**

An expat community can offer a place to share memories and find advice on dealing with many of the practical or emotional difficulties of relocating.

**| → | ...BUT DO MINGLE**

The real joy of your new life lies in becoming part of a new community. The more you strike up conversation with the *boucher*, the *boulangier* and the *fabricant de chandeler*, the more rewarding it will be.



**UNDER THE PROVENCE SUN**

Spices on sale at market; Mayle with his wife Jennie; with Ridley Scott on the set of *A Good Year*

Photo: © Peter Mayle

Photo: © Peter Mayle