

**THESE PAGES:** The surrounding landscape of the Alpilles Mountains is no doubt a source of inspiration for those taking part in the NG Art Creative Residency program.



# pausing in provence

SYDNEY ART COLLECTOR AND DEALER NICKY GINSBERG HAS  
ESTABLISHED A CREATIVE RESIDENCY IN THE SOUTH OF FRANCE.

BY ANABEL DEAN





**A**n ancient stone courtyard is the end of the journey for Sophie Levi. London's award-winning landscape painter has driven for three days across England and France to arrive in the foothills of the Alpilles Mountains in the Provence-Alpes-Cote d'Azur.

Sophie parks the car, flings open the boot and lances the silence as most of the contents clatter noisily onto gravel at her feet.

"Exactly how long are you staying?" calls out fellow artist Sarah Warley-Cummings, sketching halted on the shady terrace.

"Oh, I thought I'd just stay forever," Sophie laughs.

Artistic longing for the pale rock of Provence is satisfied within minutes of arrival at Moulin de Gréoux. This is the beautifully restored 17th-century oil mill that houses the art residency of Nicky Ginsberg and her partner, Edwin Holder-Vale.

The dilapidated Moulin de Gréoux wasn't even on the market when Nicky and Edwin drove through the open iron gates in 2020. The ancient rubble walls were crumbling, the ceilings had caved in above the swimming pool and the fine old beams were creaking under the unfamiliar weight of shifting loads. Nothing was going to stop the realisation of this dream, however. All Nicky needed to do was brighten the hues.

"The magnificence was overwhelming," she recalls. "I lived for 30 years loving the warmth offered to me in Australia — the light, colours and contrasts of the land — so I knew instantly that this was exactly what I was looking for. It was all there right on the doorstep."

Most of the artists in residence make the pilgrimage from Australia. Some of them know about Nicky, an art collector who established an arts dealership in Sydney in the early 1990s. She became an instrumental force in the transformation of inner-city Chippendale into an innovative creative arts precinct, and her first NG Art Gallery — established in a spectacular Gothic revival-style church — was the hub of a vibrant destination promoting new and established contemporary art.

It was while exploring art residences in Italy and Greece that Nicky had an epiphany: she would enrich life's offerings by encouraging the creative process in others with a not-for-profit art residency in France. Within 10 months, she had shut up shop in Australia and settled in the pretty hamlet of Eygalières, on the north-eastern edge of the Parc Naturel Régional des Alpilles, finally moving to the Moulin de Gréoux in nearby Maussane-les-Alpilles.

Writers, poets, musicians, dancers, performers, painters, composers, filmmakers and sculptors have been

coming to the Alpilles for years. It's a well-worn path. Matisse, Cezanne, van Gogh and Picasso painted here, capturing this beguiling landscape (about an hour north of Marseilles) with its saturated colours and starry night skies. "When you're born there, it's hopeless," Cezanne wrote. "Nothing else is good enough."

It's late morning and it's hot. The inky cypresses and olive trees are hot; the blue shutters on the windows are hot; Maddie Grammatopoulos is hot. The young Australian filmmaker from Adelaide has just returned from the meadows having found a space to daydream. She's straight from Cezanne's palate, a muse with wild rosemary in her hair and she's here, like the others, for nourishment. Respite. Enlightenment.

The muse turns out to be a ready companion for every small adventure. Left alone for much of the day, we find our creative moments, break rhythms with quiet pleasures. Use the bike and the car to discover the cool interiors of gastronomic cafes or ramble the ruins in Arles and Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, Avignon and Aix-en-Provence. Thursday is market day in nearby Maussane. This is a town that works for its living with three boulangeries, four hairdressers, a butcher, a pharmacist and good restaurants open throughout the year. Place Henri Giraud is bustling with stallholders selling cheese, saucisson sec, fruit, vegetables, spices, leather and Provençal fabrics.

It's exactly the place to discover and appreciate the subtleties and natural rhythms of a rural life. Swallows dip and dive under the eaves of the 18th-century church Église Sainte-Croix and we order an aperitif in a leafy square. "*La vie est trop courte pour boire du mauvais vin*," says the waiter. (Life is too short to drink bad wine.) Philosophy is a subject for exploration just about everywhere in France.

About 10 minutes' drive from Maussane, the fortified hilltop Les Baux-de-Provence is one of France's most visited villages, a medieval glory clinging precariously to the top of an ancient limestone spur or *baou*. This magical place can be crowded but not at dawn when we climb through the maze of tightly cobbled laneways in the *ville morte*, the dead town, to arrive at the locked gates of the ruined Château des Baux.

Once the seat of a chivalric society, the dominant power over more than 80 Provençal towns, it is embalmed in a white mist. Bumble bees busy themselves in garlands of lavender that punctuate the rocky crevices, and we imagine artist Sophie Levi below.

The ground falls sharply away from the ruined ramparts onto a painter's canvas of jagged shapes, hollowed-out





**THIS PAGE:** (Clockwise from top:) Moulin de Gréoux in the evening; Nicky and Edwin dining alfresco; Moulin's impressive architectural features include stone walls and vaulted ceilings; a local field.





**THESE PAGES:** (Clockwise from above left:) Residents on the steps of Moulin; finding inspiration in Arles; artists painting Les Baux-de-Provence; enjoying a glass of vino under the vines; accommodation at Moulin.



“*It all feels a bit like the rural idyll described in Peter Mayle’s bestselling 1989 book, A Year in Provence.*”



hills, olive groves and sunflower fields. Sophie is down there, carting her *en-plein air* easel through the rock gullies, following a map flickered with florescent stickers to identify points of painterly interest. Abstract landscapist Sarah Warley-Cummings is beside her, sketching every possibility, until time dissolves into afternoon.

Nicky warmly encourages expeditions such as these and there are regular messages on WhatsApp outlining suggestions. Reminders to empty the dishwasher or water the plants are intersected with places of interest that must be experienced to be believed. Later, reading through this lovely glossary of creative intervention, three things are clear: every piece of kitchen crockery has its place; every excursion has its discovery; every moment in the pursuit of enlightenment brings its reward.

One day Sophie mentions on WhatsApp that she will be up at sunrise to head for Chapelle Saint-Sixte d'Eygalières. “Parfait,” Nicky responds. “It’s very lovely. We used to have picnics there when I lived in Eygalières and watch the sun set. I’m excited to see the outcome of this glorious moment.” Sophie returns several times to her perch in Eygalières and, in the throes of inspiration on another day, cancels planned conviviality. “I’m pushing on with my picture while the sun holds off,” she texts. “Sorry to miss lunch at café de la Place ... but *bon appétit* to you all.”

Meals not eaten at restaurants are crafted at home by Nicky and Edwin. Gatherings are leisurely occasions dedicated to celebrating the regional specialties of abundant agricultural practices. There is always a celebratory glass of good regional wine. Nicky is a discerning foodie — a convert to robust, rustic Mediterranean cuisine — so food is ingrained in every venture.

When our hosts have a night off, the fridge is full ... “Potatoes are in the laundry. Sophie knows,” Nicky

messages. “Chicken is organic and cooked. I popped it in the fridge. There are loads of vegetables and there is a large lettuce to be washed in the salad spinner. *Bon appétit.*”

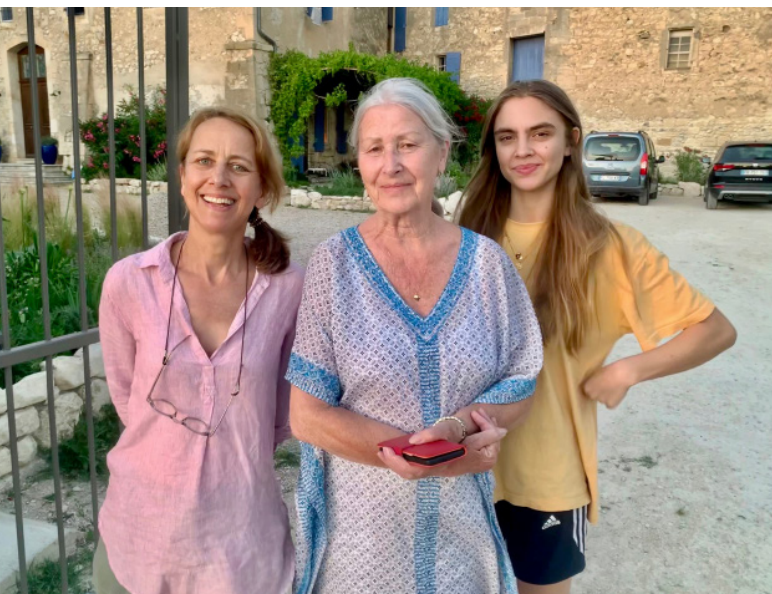
It all feels a bit like the rural idyll described in Peter Mayle’s bestselling 1989 book, *A Year in Provence*. Nicky is a master of mixing and matching, and the Moulin inspires a warm sense of belonging. The mill is a melange of styles. Old beams and ageless stonework, bric-a-brac, flea-market and brocante treasures and a slick, chic modern style.

A steady stream of builders works on the final renovations and the creatives are good at going with the flow. When the scream of a stone cutter sears the air like a fingernail across a chalk board, it’s “no problem”, according to Sophie. “It will be over soon.” When a builder in the kitchen is chatting volubly before breakfast in a language that seems to bear no resemblance to French learnt at school, it’s “*Bonjour Monsieur; non Monsieur; incroyable Monsieur*” ... But life moves on in a slow, lazy-river sort of way.

There is no substitute for local life and it is Sunday when Nicky suggests an excursion to L’Isle-sur-la-Sorgue. The town is a quintessential slice of Provence where cheese-makers and lavender vendors echo the world of artisan skill through centuries. The pathways beside canals are so crowded that they’re virtually impenetrable, but there is respite in the antique shops jammed with old wares that will never fit in a suitcase, and some of the human kit-baggery looks to have been around since the early civilisations.

It may almost be true as Provence was settled by the Ligurians, the Celts and the Greeks, before conquest by Julius Caesar in the mid-first century BC when the region really began to flourish. Twenty-five minutes’ drive away from Moulin de Gréoux is Arles, one of the oldest towns in





**THIS PAGE:** (Clockwise from above:) Artists Sophie Levi, Sarah Warley-Cummings and Maddie Grammatopoulos; Sophie at work; Sarah's painting of a landscape at Maussane-les-Alpilles.



Provence, considered to be one of France's most culturally rich cities with its Roman monuments, ancient aqueduct and amphitheatre. Bullfights are still held in the 20,000-seat Roman amphitheatre.

Vincent van Gogh painted some of his most memorable masterpieces while living in Arles — more than 300 works in the town and surrounds — including the famous yellow awning of the outdoor eatery depicted in his *Café Terrace at Night*. There are no free tables when we arrive but the muse has a better idea. More of van Gogh's work can be explored about 20 minutes' drive from the residency, at Saint-Rémy de Provence, home to the artist when he admitted himself to Saint-Paul de Mausole asylum in May 1889.

In spite of his mental instability, it was probably van Gogh's most prolific period, and he produced more than 140 paintings in Saint-Rémy. So much is recognisable here, the view of his bedroom in the asylum, the cypress trees, irises in bloom, almond blossoms, the Alpilles landscapes that inspired his tortured mind and resulted in his renowned paintings.

The asylum is on the outskirts of Saint-Rémy and, when van Gogh arrived, he was on the road out of melancholy. He left one year later with a medical report that said "cured" but within four weeks he was dead. The shot that killed him is generally accepted to be self-inflicted. He was 37 and had sold just one painting. Shortly before he died, he wrote to his brother: "I can't change the fact that my paintings don't sell. But the time will come when people will recognise that they are worth more than the value of the paints used in the picture."

Artists always leave a shadow behind. Even those with names less well known. There are traces of work left all over the Moulin de Gréoux and all of them are worth more than the value of the paints. And so, as a sun-drenched whole, the residency reveals a bright view of the world through so many different eyes but, to me, it's still got to be a vibrating van Gogh yellow. **AC**

*For more information on the NG Art Creative Residency, visit [ngartcreative.com](http://ngartcreative.com).*