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Treasure isle

IF YOU LOVE ANTIQUES AND BRIC-A-BRAC, THE PROVENÇAL TOWN OF L'ISLE-SUR-LA-SORGUE PROVIDES AN ENCHANTING, WATERY SETTING FOR THE WORLD'S OLDEST BROCANTE FAIR, SAYS **GERRI GALLAGHER**

Nothing quite compares to the thrill of a treasure hunt, especially when it takes place at L'Isle-sur-la-Sorgue Antiques Art & You. This revitalised and renamed international event (formerly the Foire Internationale à la Brocante et à l'Antiquité) is held over several days twice a year, at Easter and Assumption (in August). It may be the oldest antique fair in the world, but it has a fresh feel thanks to the efforts of Jacques Chalvin, event organiser extraordinaire, appointed in 2017. His goal is to make L'Isle-sur-la-Sorgue universally recognised as the home of 'objets' in the way that Cannes is considered the city of cinema. He believes that 'objets transform people and people transform objets.' His five-year plan may be ambitious, but given the scope of the upcoming August event and its expected attendance, Jacques is well on his way to bringing all manner of objects together, regardless of age, style or provenance.

The fair started in 1966 with just 14 stands. Fast forward over 50 years and now hundreds of visiting exhibitors join the nearly 300 permanent experts for a five-day festival in this town, which has the highest concentration of antique, vintage and bric-a-brac stores outside Paris. The resident dealers (by and large the purveyors of the finest quality offerings) are arranged in 10 'villages' scattered throughout the town and in centres, some of which are themed around modern art, antique books, or design and decoration. Visiting exhibitors, who tend to fall into the brocante category, congregate in the glorious Parc Gautier and spill out onto the adjacent riverside. Everywhere you look, there is stuff and more stuff: tables that began life as Forties motorcycles, linens and lace, china, soda siphons, school desks, Ricard and Pernod signs.

So how best to navigate this event? Allow a few days, because words cannot convey the enormity and diversity of it - remember, there are 10 villages, plus

Parc Gautier and the vendors along the river to visit. If you are a serious collector, your first port of call should be Le Village des Antiquaires de la Gare, a former textile mill that houses more than 100 dealers offering everything from seventeenth-century furniture to oriental rugs and bronze statues. Move onto the Carré des Art du Luberon for paintings, Murano glass lamps and chandeliers, and save the rest for day two.

Work your way along avenue de la Libération, which is home to the majority of the high-end design and decoration shops. The current darling of this stretch is RBC Vintage (at number 9), which sells twentieth-century pieces by Knoll, Artemide and Vitra. My favourite was the 'Egg' chair in foal leather by Arne Jacobsen. Then, if you are game, enter the gates of Parc Gautier, roll up your sleeves and rummage through acres of what look like your grandmother's discards. And do persevere, because the thrill of unearthing treasures buried among tat is what it is all about.

When you have had enough of searching, bargaining and buying, escape the throngs and wander the streets of this enchanting town. L'Isle-sur-la-Sorgue is known as the Venice of Provence, thanks to the river that in the nineteenth century powered the town's wool, silk and paper factories with a network of waterwheels - a dozen of which are still in situ. For culture, visit the Villa Datri Foundation for Contemporary Sculpture. The Collégiale Notre Dame des Anges is a magnificent church on place de la Liberté; its stark façade gives no hint of its flamboyant interior.

Exhibitions, conferences and even a parade of vintage cars run throughout the Antiques Art & You event - extras that Jacques Chalvin has introduced. Since the five days are now so packed with activities, the crowds are even bigger; the traffic is even slower and parking is a challenge. However, this event - a flea market, boot sale and *Antiques Roadshow* all rolled into one - is the greatest treasure hunt ever. So it is worth the effort and not to be missed.

The next L'Isle-sur-la-Sorgue Antiques Art & You is on August 11-15, 9am to 6pm (foire-isle-sur-sorgue.fr)

ABOVE AND BELOW L'Isle-sur-la-Sorgue has nearly 300 antique sellers and hosts more during the festival. **BOTTOM** Château Giraud in Parc Gautier. **BOTTOM RIGHT** Diners on a bridge across the River Sorgue



Ways and Means

WHERE TO STAY

La Bastide de Marie This eighteenth-century farmhouse in Ménerbes, set in 59 acres of vineyards, is bursting with antiques sourced from sellers in L'Isle-sur-la-Sorgue, which is a 20-minute drive away.

Rooms cost from €408, half-board, during the antique fair (the hotel is open from April to November).

labastidedemarie.com

Le Domaine de Palmerie

This newly restored eighteenth-century manor house, which was Albert Camus' holiday home in the Fifties, is only a six-minute bicycle ride from L'Isle-sur-la-Sorgue. The five rooms are decorated in a striking contemporary style and cost from €190, B&B.

ledomainedepalmerie.com

WHERE TO EAT

Le Vivier is a Michelin-starred fine-dining destination on cours Fernande Peyre.

levivier-restaurant.com

Le Jardin du Quai on avenue Julien Guigue serves simple bistro food with a seasonal menu that changes daily. The real draw is the garden just steps away from all the action. jardin-du-quai.com

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CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE LEFT Vines at La Bastide de Marie. The hotel is full of antiques sourced from L'Isle-sur-la-Sorgue. The River Sorgue and its canals flow through the town, giving it its soubriquet the Venice of Provence. Café de France on place de la Liberté. Piles of architectural salvage

