



There's no way to avoid saying this: Saint-Paul-de-Vence is overflowing with tourists. The problem is, unlike Nice or Cannes, this tiny town perched above the Côte d'Azur isn't really designed for them, so everyone just sort of squeezes in and then squeezes out again.

Despite this, the place is very charming—it's the archetypal idyllic medieval hilltop village. If you like art you'll love it here. Saint-Paul, you see, is a celebration of the brush stroke.

There are scores of art galleries and artisanal stores selling original, authentic, and sometimes not-so-authentic artwork. There is a world-famous restaurant and hotel, La Colombe d'Or (page 189), which displays priceless artwork from the likes of Picasso, Dufy, and Modigliani, often given as gifts by the once-penniless artists in return for a meal. And there are many artists still living and working here, so you're liable to see that classic French scene of a bereted bohemian squinting before his canvas as he calculates the perspective on a landscape of dappled light.

Art seems to be the dominant commercial activity here, and when you wander around you'll soon understand why. The light is clear, and even when it's beautifully diffused in the mornings and evenings there's still a delightful quality to it. And the views are astonishing: The village's location on a narrow spur between two deep valleys guarantees that there will always be a vista to sketch. The town itself is endearing, with its old stone houses and honey-colored stone walls—so cool on a hot Provençal afternoon. And the streets (when clear) are lovely to linger in, watching the locals play *pétanque* (boules) under the shade of the plane trees.

Saint-Paul has a timeless beauty: It could be 2013, or it could be 1913. Remove the tour buses, and the place is as it was a century ago. No wonder artists such as Renoir, Chagall, Modigliani, and Matisse were seduced by the classic beauty. It's just a pity that Saint-Paul has become a victim of its own artistic success. Never mind; there are still corners you can explore without fear of being elbowed out of the way by a day pack or a digital SLR.

Not surprisingly, some of the nicest things to do here involve embracing the artistic spirit. Make a reservation for a truly memorable lunch at La Colombe d'Or (1 Place du Général de Gaulle) and take in the incredible artwork lining the walls while you sip your wine. (Tip: The terrace is the best place to sit, as the views are amazing. But you'll miss out on the paintings.)

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Or you can visit the grave of Russian-born painter Marc Chagall in the town's pretty cemetery (Chemin de Saint-Paul), and add a small white stone as a tribute to his work. Or you can drop into some of the artists' workshops and talk aesthetics. Or you can pay a visit to the world-renowned **Fondation Maeght** (623 Chemin des Gardettes, page 205), and be rewarded with an extraordinary collection of 20th-century paintings, sculptures, and ceramics, along with a museum setting that combines water, trees, shade, nature, and utter tranquillity.

If you love the lively spirit of Saint-Paul, consider visiting on Saturday, which is market day. The weekly fair creates a boisterous, festival atmosphere throughout the village, filled with color, stalls, and irresistible produce.

The thing is, the tourists here may make your viewing opportunities difficult, so if you find the crowds too much, get back in the car and go farther up the road to **Vence**, Saint-Paul's quieter neighbor. It's just as beautiful but has fewer people, better shops (in my opinion), more interesting art galleries, and gorgeous cafés with terraces that are less cramped. There are also delicious pâtisseries, where you can buy a baguette or freshly made pastry and then find a quiet spot for a picnic.

Another village worth seeing is **Tourrettes-sur-Loup**, which is just under two miles (about three kilometers) west of **Vence**, and also has lots of great art stores run by artists.





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