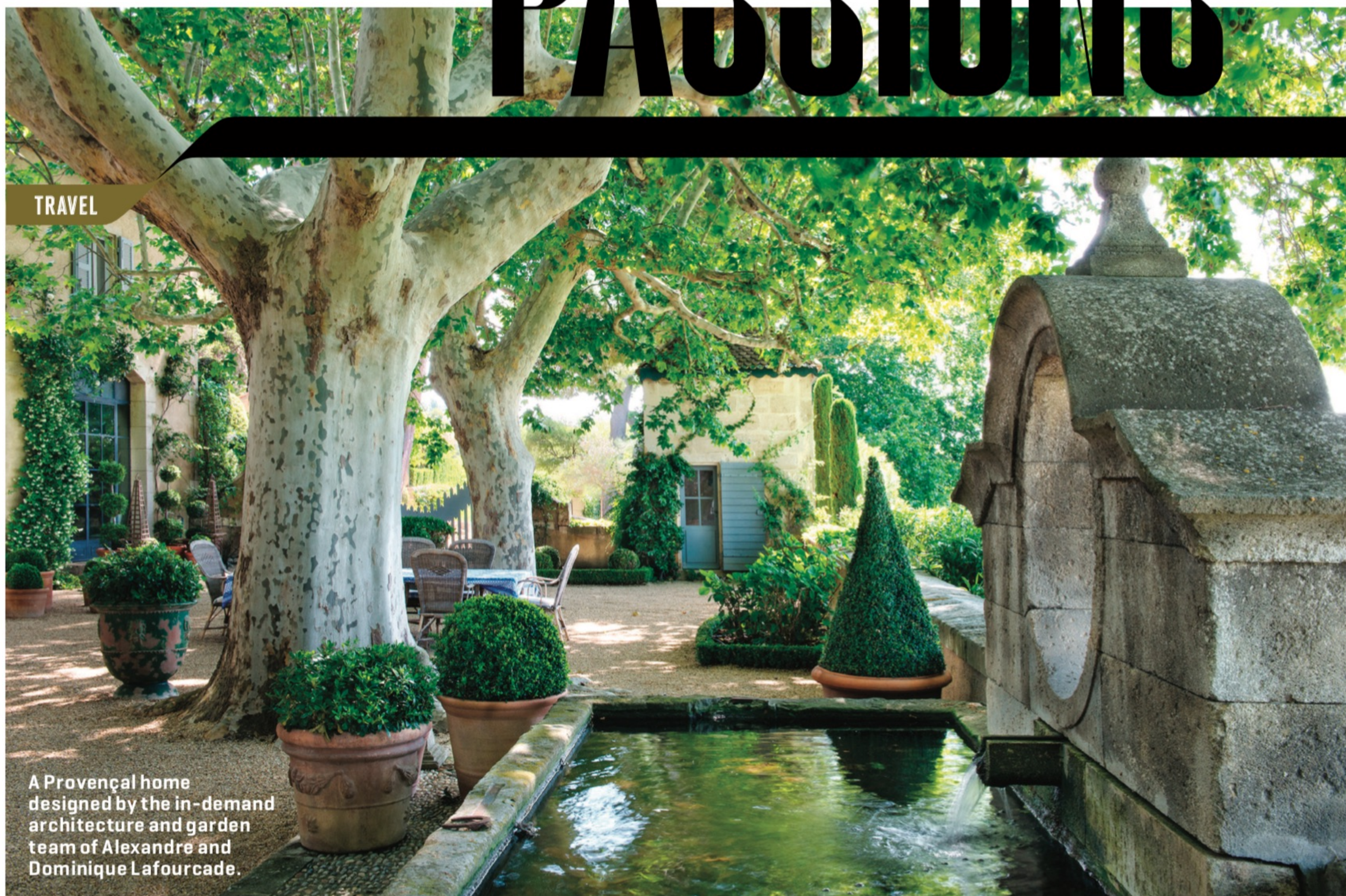


PASSIONS

TRAVEL



A Provençal home designed by the in-demand architecture and garden team of Alexandre and Dominique Lafourcade.

BUYING PROVENCE

Like the food, wine, and scenery of southeastern France, its stunning properties are never out of style for long.

By Lindsey Tramuta

“IT’S THE LIGHT and the landscape,” says artist and garden designer Dominique Lafourcade of the enduring appeal of Provence. “Peter Mayle probably had something to do with it too.” Her own verdant home lies in St.-Rémy-de-Provence, a picturesque town about 10 miles south of Avignon.

The region’s crisp, painterly light, neat rows of plane and cypress trees, and a pastel palette pulled straight from a Postimpressionist canvas were among the motivations for the late English author Mayle’s move to a farmhouse in Ménerbes in 1987. Much like Cézanne and Van Gogh, whose beloved works

were directly inspired by the Provençal setting, Mayle owed his literary stardom to his adopted home.

Provence, in turn, can thank Mayle’s endearing tales—notably his bestselling memoir *A Year in Provence* and the novel *A Good Year*—for inspiring a steady stream of vacationers and foreign homebuyers, even decades later.

But beyond being able to deliver on the promise of a languid pace and varied scenic beauty, the region offers privacy, chief among the reasons affluent travelers keep visiting and investing.

“If you look at second-home buyers across budgets, most are French



and increasingly Parisian. The TGV train to Avignon is only two hours and 30 minutes now. It's a practical getaway," explains Philippe Boulet, director of the Emile Garcin real estate agency. "But for high-end residences, our clients are largely foreign—English, Northern European, and Belgian. American investment fluctuates but is strong at the moment." According to Boulet, the hot-ticket properties—running anywhere from \$500,000 to \$10 million before renovation—are often dated or run-down farmhouses, small castles, and villas around the Alpilles mountain range and in such regions as the Luberon, the Camargue, and the Var, at the edge of the Riviera.

American Shauna Varvel laid down roots on a secluded, 65-acre property on Île de la Barthelasse, near the Alpilles, after a decade of renting homes in Provence each year with her family. Before the purchase in 2015, the Varvels rented the estate's 13,000-square-foot 18th-century farmhouse and fell in love. "The house needed extensive renovation, but we loved the flat green land and its uniquely large size to accommodate our five children," says Varvel.

She hired Lafourcade Architecture, a 40-year-old firm based



Two Lafourcade revivals: the Abbaye de Pierredon estate (left); a dining room at Le Mas des Poiriers.

in St.-Rémy that has become well-known in the region for its restorations of homes, hotels, and wine estates. In the footsteps of his father, Bruno, architect Alexandre Lafourcade led the overhaul of Varvel's property, imbuing the rustic with unmistakable sophistication all while respecting prickly local regulations, such as building from only existing structures and hewing to the area's signature style.

The net result of a Lafourcade renovation is a robust residence with a timeless aesthetic plus modern comforts and technology. At every stage of his projects, he works exclusively with local artisans and artists, including his mother, Dominique, who designs the elaborate gardens that embellish each property, filling wild and unused land with exquisite landscape compositions that regularly earn attention

in the world's leading home and garden magazines.

In the case of the Varvel estate, Le Mas des Poiriers (Pear Trees Farmhouse), the interior and exterior design needed to serve several purposes. "We inherited a tax code that requires us to farm and to rent. We produce over 60 tons of pears each year as well as an extensive sunflower crop," she explains. With seven bedrooms, a tennis court, a swimming pool, and a cottage with two additional bedrooms, it's an ideal home for a large family, both Varvel's and those who rent the property for weddings or getaways.

Today, Alexandre Lafourcade wagers that foreign buyers make up 90% of his clients: "It's only been in the last two to three years that Americans have really come back to invest. When they do, it's for the dream, the magic of the South. What's different now is that with greater means of accessing the region, the dream is even easier to achieve." ■