

TRAVEL

CHARITY'S REWARD IN FRANCE

By Janet Mendelsohn
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It started at a charity event in downtown Worcester and ended at a 500-year-old stone house in rural France. We were at the fund-raiser with our longtime friends, Pat and Alec, and their friends, Tim and Betsy, whom we barely knew. There was an open bar and excellent hors d'oeuvres. At dinner, the waitstaff kept our wine glasses filled.

It was a night to support Devereux Massachusetts, a school for children and young adults with severe emotional, social, behavioral, and autism spectrum disorders, and in that spirit, Alec, Tim, and my husband, Bob, were pumped up for competitive bidding.

Perusing the live auction booklet, they zeroed in on Item 13: A Week in the South of France. There were no photos. No way to locate the village, Valros. Checking MapQuest on phones didn't help. But they were charmed by the description of a "five-bedroom, modernized, 15th-century stone home 20 minutes from the sparkling Mediterranean. Conveniently located near vineyards, restaurants, antique shops, Crusade-era fortresses, early Roman architectural marvels, and charming Renaissance towns and villages."

They couldn't be serious, thought their wives.

Ah, but they were. The men huddled and emerged with a plan. Rather than compete against one another, they would pool their bids. When the fluid-tongued auctioneer announced number 13, Alec was the point man in the ensuing tug-of-war. Bidding escalated quickly.

Bob and I had never traveled with these people. Nor had we planned to when the night began. But suddenly the six of us would be vacationing together and four of us were practically strangers.

"At charity fund-raisers, 15 to 20 percent of the auction items, especially trips, typically go unclaimed by winning bidders," said Dave Wahl, Devereux's gala coordinator. It's tempting when fate invites you to stay in a private villa, an island getaway, a European pied-à-terre. While the properties' donors make use of idle weeks at their second home, bidders picture lifestyles of the rich and famous. After the auction, reality can hit like a splash of ice water.

"We don't always know why," said Wahl. "Most likely they didn't notice particular dates were attached to the trips. Or airfare, which isn't included, is more than they expected." Maybe terrorist or health threats increased. A lot can happen.

But a few thousand dollars later, none of us had suffered bidders' remorse, as far as I know. We found Valros, a pinprick on the map south of Montpellier. We agreed on a date 14 months away.



Thinking things would go smoother if we knew one another better, over the next year we took turns hosting home-cooked meals. We found common ground. We imagined collaborating on dinners in our rustic French kitchen.

One day, a 19-page "User's Manual" arrived by e-mail. The home's owner, Simone, had detailed everything you could possibly want to know, in English. Instructions for appliances. The complex local schedule for recycling and trash collection. Fifty suggested day trips in and beyond the Languedoc-Roussillon region. Bless her.

At long last, we followed Simone's driving directions from Montpellier into the village along a narrow road surrounded by grapes on the vine.

Valros (founded circa 1300) charmed us at first glance. Its winding streets were designed more for horse and wagon than for cars. In a shaded,

postage-stamp of a town square, a storefront bar opened late in the afternoons; its local patrons seemed suspicious of strangers. Church bells rang day and night but a posted notice said services are held in another town. A brick school appeared closed, although it was May, and Town Hall seemed deserted all week, but everywhere window boxes sprouted red geraniums and herbs grew in pots beside doorways. There was one wine shop and a single boulangerie, opening daily just after dawn.

On rue du Portail, our address for the week, 500-year-old stone houses are snug against one another, two stories high in the front, three in the back along the ancient ramparts. We found ours. White lace curtains concealed the view through a window surrounded by Mediterranean-blue shutters.

Inside it was cool and dark in the coziest of ways. According to Simone's

A house on rue du Portail, the street where the author stayed for a week in Valros, in the South of France. Her fellow travelers were united by winning an auction at a Worcester charity event.

manual, the home's age varies by room. The vaulted living room is the oldest, dating to around 1470. Its huge fireplace, "big enough to hold roasting boar" boasts a mantel carved with the Latin phrase, "The devil take ungrateful guests," an old saying in tavern kitchens, which is what the room once was. Then it was a horse stable. Much later, it was the town's official bomb shelter during World War II. In the dining room, a new addition in the mid-1500s, was pottery made by local artisans. Between the two was a galley kitchen with a tiny stove that saw little action that week.

We chose bedrooms. Each couple got their own bathroom, a point we later agreed was essential for harmony. If anything, we were overly polite,

Our best meals in France by far were in Valros.

but frankly that made sharing chores easy.

Every morning Alec slipped out early to bring us fresh croissants from the boulangerie. When we didn't eat dinner out, we picnicked "at home," on the fruits of our foray to the Saturday market in nearby Pézenas. Superb cheeses, sausages, salad, and wine arrayed on our private top-floor terrace, beside an olive tree, under the stars.

Not everything went smoothly. Although three of us bought AT&T's Passport international phone package, we couldn't text, e-mail, or call one another during the entire trip. Stymied by technology, unable to communicate when apart, we grew testy.

And had it not been for the auction, I never would have chosen Valros as home base. We spent too many hours driving to historic sites. Yet sometimes the best is unexpected.

In Paris, we ate at the table of a renowned chef and it was mostly good. But our best meals in France by far were in Valros, at the far edge of town, where there's new construction. L'Asparagus is a humble restaurant run by a self-taught chef and his wife. At sunset, we were seated on the terrace beside a wheat field that stretches to another distant medieval village. We struggled with the menu. Our Level I French was only slightly better than the English of our hostess but she helped us order well. Her husband prepared the freshest of Mediterranean dishes, cold soups, fish, and lamb. She recommended a lovely local wine, priced like soda at home, and cajoled us to have desserts she made that morning. We returned five nights later for our last night in the South of France. The meal was even better.

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Sizing up a proper formal fit

► LAHENS
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himself with one suit or another. A good suit is like a loyal companion, accompanying him through some of life's most significant moments: funerals, weddings, job interviews. The right suit can boost its owner, make him a better version of himself, just as the wrong one can leave him looking like the proprietor of a prostitution ring.

Being able to tell the difference is the challenge, and this is where Lahens comes in.

His number one piece of advice? Know what you're looking for.

"What are you trying to accomplish?" he asks. "To satisfy your wife? Or work? A lot of times that's the most important question."

Looking at suits with Lahens is like watching football with an NFL coach: He notices a lot of stuff you don't. Among the things that catch his eye during the hour and a half you spend together: the width of a suit's lapels, the finish on the buttons. Even a good buttonhole has the power to draw him in ("The good thing about this one is that the buttonhole is functional," he says, "which means you could put a boutonniere in it.")

At one point, he pulls a blazer that he also happens to be wearing from

the rack. What you see is a simple blue jacket, with flecks of color in the material. Lahens, though, sees possibility. The number of ways in which it could be worn — to work, with a dress shirt, or over a slim-fitting sweatshirt at dinner.

Ways to wear it aside, those in the market for a suit should be concerned first and foremost with fit. If creating a pleasing silhouette is the ultimate goal — and it should be — then ensuring the suit fits properly is vital. Whatever a man's body type, a suit that's too baggy or boxy can make him look larger than he is. As Lahens explains, a jacket should fit snugly around the shoulders, the sleeves should stop at the point where the wrist and the hand meets, and the pants should fall just a bit higher than the shoe begins (ensuring all of these things, he says, will almost definitely require a tailor).

Lapels shouldn't be neglected, either. For someone looking for versatility, Lahens recommends a "notch" lapel instead of the more formal "peak" lapel. And always be sure a jacket's lapels are roughly the same width as the tie being worn.

"Let's say you have a 3-inch tie and a 1½-inch lapel," he says. "Then the tie will overpower the lapel."

Lahens's taste for fashion began early on. As a high schooler, he would pull suits from his father's closet to wear to school dances, and by the time he'd graduated college, his own collection had begun to take shape. After a stint as a software engineer, he and a friend went into business together, and Lahens eventually founded DressCode Boston, a retail marketing firm connecting brands with the local market.



A men's jacket with a notch lapel and shirt from Frank & Oak on Newbury Street.

His own collection includes suits and accessories from various local shops — Bobby From Boston, Drinkwater's Cambridge, Blank Label — but he also insists that you can find a perfectly adequate suit from a department store or menswear chain.

At the moment, he has turned his attention to a gray-colored number in the back of the store. It's a woven blazer with intertwined stitching, maybe not versatile enough for someone looking for a single suit that can work for any occasion, but a fashionable ensemble that could certainly compliment a man's closet.

"This is a good suit for the season," he says. "It's a good suit for a guy who's

FIVE MUSTS FOR BUYING A GREAT MEN'S SUIT

Whether you're a first-time buyer or a seasoned veteran, these five tips — courtesy of Jeff Lahens — will help ensure that you end up with the right suit.

- 1. You've got to be all-in.** In suit-shopping, as in rehab, you've got to be committed or it's never going to work. Even if you're less than thrilled to be spending your Saturday inside a men's store, treat the process as an opportunity, not something to get through. "The minute they say in their mind 'I'm not a suit guy,' it doesn't matter what you put on them," Lahens says. "It's not going to work."
- 2. Consider the color:** Understanding what suit best fits your needs is integral, and that includes color. If it's something you're going to be wearing semi-regularly, stick with one of the three staples: black, navy, or gray. If you're looking for versatility, go with gray. If you want something more formal, go with black.
- 3. A little discomfort never hurt anybody.** Part of suiting-up is understanding that you're going to

feel a little physically restricted — especially today, when slim-fitting suits are very much en vogue. The jacket should fit snugly, inhibiting a bit of your movement, while the pants should fit tighter than a pair of jeans and be hemmed to just above the top of the shoe.

4. Don't skimp on the shoes: How important are good shoes? Lahens ranks them higher even than ties in the pantheon of suit-related accessories. Too many times he's seen a guy drop \$1,000 or more on a suit only to cheapen it with sub-standard footwear. "If you want to look like a million bucks," he says, "then your shoes gotta look like a million bucks."

5. Get to a tailor, swiftly. Many inexperienced suit-buyers figure that once their suit is packaged and paid for, the process is over. Hardly. Getting a suit tailored can cost an extra \$50 to \$100, but it's an absolute necessity, Lahens says. "It doesn't matter if you buy a \$200 suit (or) a \$5,000 suit, a good tailor will create that magic for you."

DUGAN ARNETT

looking for a more causal suit that he can wear for the season that's coming — New Year or Christmas?"

Still, he's quick to point out that there is no magical formula, no one-size-fits-all approach.

"Style is personal," he says. "I think sometimes we try to fit somebody into

a box where they can't remain themselves, (and) they're not going to have that confidence. You've got to make sure you put the right suit on a guy."

Even, apparently, if it's olive green.

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