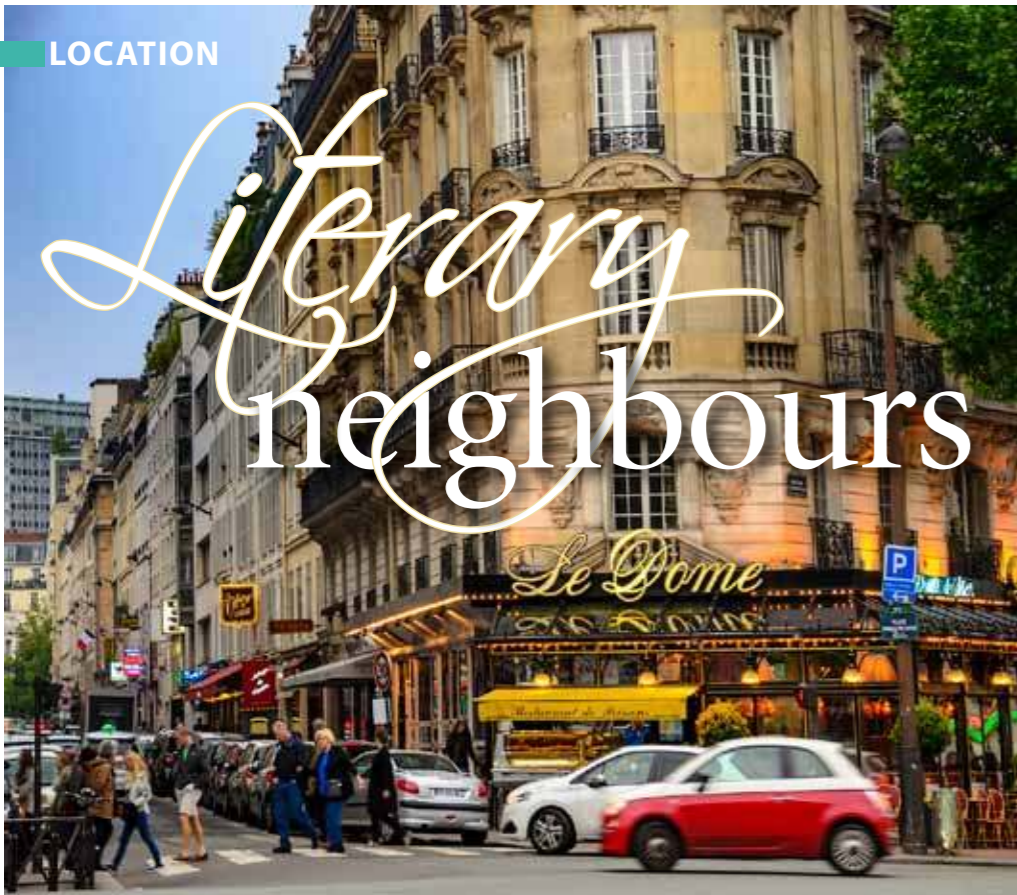


Literary neighbours



Left: The famous restaurant Le Dôme on Montparnasse boulevard in Paris. Opened in 1898 it was frequented by sculptors, writers and painters
Above: La Rotonde in Montparnasse, one of many Parisian cafés that are perfect for people-watching

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France is nothing if not inspiring to writers, but four areas seem to attract more than their fair share of literary greats. **Ulrike Lemmin-Woolfrey** finds out why Normandy, Brittany, Paris, and Provence are so compelling – and why you should buy there

PARIS

Next to my cup a plaque reads 'Jean-Paul Sartre', and, opposite, next to my notepad, I see the marker that reminds me that Simone de Beauvoir used to sit here. The table next to me claims that F. Scott Fitzgerald once sipped his drink there and, obviously, the bar was often propped up by Ernest Hemingway. When you are having a coffee at La Closerie des Lilas in Montparnasse, it is difficult not to get inspired

to write the masterpiece that's been ping-ponging around in your mind all these years.

It is practically impossible to step out in Paris without stumbling across a spot that was once frequented by some artist, be it a painter, sculptor or writer, or anything in between. But the area around the Jardin du Luxembourg, the 5th, 6th and northern 15th *arrondissements*, were the stomping grounds of the writers. It was a relatively affordable area in those hip

1920s and it was cheaper to linger in the cafés than trying to heat your apartment. Then there is the Jardin du Luxembourg itself, still a haven of tranquillity, with many benches calling out for you to sit and read or write a book.

Between Boulevard St-Germain with its Café de Flore and Les Deux Magots (both achingly beautiful cafés with the best people-watching terraces in Paris, and regular haunts of Sartre, Beauvoir, Joyce, Camus, Brecht and more recently, Adam Gopnik) and Boulevard Montparnasse, with Le Dôme, La Rotonde, La Coupole and La Closerie, lies a *quartier* filled with literary history.

In 1919, in Rue Dupuytren, Sylvia Beach opened the original Shakespeare and Co bookshop, which soon became a second home to the so-called Lost Generation, writers such as Gertrude Stein and Hemingway, before moving to slightly larger premises in Rue de l'Odéon. Oscar Wilde died nearby in the then cheap Hotel d'Alsace on Rue des Beaux-Arts, which also played host to Argentine writer Luis Borges. Down the road, in Hotel d'Angleterre on Rue Jacob, Hemingway and his first wife Hadley stayed upon first arriving in Paris.

Staying in hotels was a favourite with James Joyce, who breaks all records having lived at some 19 different addresses in Paris, including the Grand Hotel Corneille in Rue Corneille and the Hotel Lutetia on Boulevard Raspail, both in the 6th. He and his family then moved to the 5th *arrondissement*, 71 Rue Cardinal Lemoine, steps away from Hemingway's apartment at number 74. Hemingway went back to the 6th with his second wife, and lived at 6 Rue Férou, close to his beloved Jardin du Luxembourg.

Unsurprisingly, prices are high around the Jardin du Luxembourg, and the 6th, the former cheap *arrondissement* that attracted penniless artists, is now one of the most expensive areas

On the market

Paris



€400,000: 29m² studio with lots of storage in a well-maintained 1800s building just 250m from the Luxembourg gardens (Leggett)

€449,000: 25m² studio apartment on Rue Bonaparte, between St-Germain-des-Prés and Place St-Sulpice; 6th *arrondissement* (Paris Property Group)

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The Place Forum des Cardeurs in Aix-en-Provence's old town

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in Paris. Cross Boulevard Montparnasse, into the 15th, and things ease up a little.

When it comes to apartments, according to Kathryn Brown of Paris Property Group, most of us look for the authentic Parisian 'Haussmann' experience in a neighbourhood with easy access to museums, theatres, bars, cafés and restaurants. When it comes to Haussmann architecture versus new-build, Americans and Brits tend heavily towards the 19th-century buildings. To get a better deal, however, you might want to look for a fixer-upper in an older building in a less popular neighbourhood. After all, Paris is such a small city, you will only ever be steps away from that view of the Eiffel Tower, or that literary café to write your bestseller in.

"For value near Luxembourg gardens, the most affordable area of the 6th is found to the west and south of the gardens in the direction

“Provence was another favourite of the Parisian writers, but it was Peter Mayle with his autobiographical *A Year in Provence*, who later put the area on the map for English speakers”

of Montparnasse,” says Kathryn. “With the unsightly tower and surrounding area getting a facelift and becoming more green and pedestrian-friendly in time for the Olympics, look for prices to grow in that area of the 6th, as well as in the bordering area of the 15th.

“Moving counter-clockwise, even more budget-friendly finds can be made in the area of Port Royal which straddles the 5th, 6th and 14th,” she adds. The area is less well known than the other sides of the garden, but to the south lies the Observatoire at the end of a long green esplanade. The leafy neighborhoods in the 14th between Luxembourg and the Catacombs are central and inhabited by locals. Rue Daguerre is particularly nice. In addition to being a stone's throw from Luxembourg gardens, that part of the 5th *arrondissement* is also close to Rue Mouffetard, the Panthéon and the Roman ruins near Métro Monge.

PROVENCE

Without a doubt Provence was another favourite of the Parisian writers, and the region's mellow light and colours also inspired famous painters such as Cézanne and Van Gogh. It was Peter Mayle with *A Year in Provence*, who put Provence on the map for English speakers though. The expat writer, who died earlier this year, painted life in Provence in words, bringing the colours, the chirping of cicadas, the food smells, even the cafés of nearby Aix-en-Provence and the bustling market on Cours Mirabeau to life.

He initially lived in Ménerbes in the Luberon. His books were such a success that he upped sticks and moved to America for a while, before Provence – or Luberon – lured him back to Lourmarin, and later Vaugines.

Vaugines, incidentally, is the setting of the French films *Jean de Florette* and *Manon des*

Sources, both based on books written by Provençal writer Marcel Pagnol. The author and playwright was a true son of Provence, born in Aubagne, a student in Marseille, and buried in La Treille, on the outskirts of Marseille.

His autobiographies *My Father's Glory* and *My Mother's Castle*, are like a French cross of *Cider with Rosie* and *My Family and other Animals* – a summer's breeze, in which you can smell the lavender, hear the cicadas and be transported to the Provençal hills. At the pinnacle of his film-producing success, he bought land near Aubagne to establish a Hollywood in Provence. Luckily, it did not come off.

I wonder if Marcel Pagnol ever came across the American chef, cookbook and biography author, Julia Child, who moved from Paris to Marseille in the 1950s. She was so enchanted by Provence and its cuisine, that she and her husband returned to live at La Pitchoune in Plascassier.

Just north of Aix-en-Provence, back in Peter Mayle's Lourmarin, Albert Camus had found his writer's retreat. Intrigued by Provence since his school years, he left Algiers for a visit to the Château de Lourmarin where his teacher had previously stayed as a writer-in-residence – and which still today hosts writers' retreats – and fell in love with the region.

Alas, it was not until after the success of *La Peste* and winning the Nobel Prize, that Camus could afford to buy a house in the village. It seems that even before Peter Mayle's book, house prices in Provence were not for everyone. Sadly, he died only a couple of years later in a car accident and is now buried in the village cemetery.

If you want to follow suit and move to the hills in the south, bear in mind that anything with 'Provence' in the address or name, automatically adds to the price. Sadly, those run-down properties that are just asking to be done up, have pretty much been done and turned into priceless (budgets between €500,000 to €1m) little gems.

However, in neighbouring regions such as Occitanie, or on the edges of Provence in Drôme, you can get more for your money, without compromising on the surroundings. ▶

On the market

Provence



€227,910: Restored three-bedroom village house with open views in southern Luberon (Leggett)

€895,000: Five-bedroom villa in Aix-en-Provence on a private plot of 3,047m² (Home Hunts)

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LOCATION

Cabourg is a genteel resort on the Normandy coast, at the mouth of the River Dives

THE NORTH-WEST

If you took a straw poll of all the French people you know, you'd find that an incredible number have holiday homes or regular rental agreements in Normandy and Brittany. The cooler, rugged coast may, quite literally, be hundreds of miles away from sunny, calm Provence, but it is no less popular. And that goes for writers, too.

If you have ever worked your way through Marcel Proust's seven-volume *In Search of Lost Time*, you'll find that the main character, let's call him young Marcel, spends a lot of time on the Normandy coast for his health. His fictional town of Balbec is based on Cabourg and the Grand-Hôtel (room 414), where he resides with his grandmother.

He takes long walks along the seemingly endless beach, visits a nearby church with his young female friends, and later explores the

countryside to stay at friends' houses. The author wrote many chapters of his tome in his room overlooking the sea. Another extended hotel stay, that of Oscar Wilde in Berneval-le-Grand, resulted in Wilde's work *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*.

Guy de Maupassant, writer of many short stories, spent his childhood in and around Étretat, while Victor Hugo spent holidays writing poems in Fécamp, on the northern edge of Normandy, and reportedly loved Rouen, hometown of Gustave Flaubert.

While Normandy is blessed with long straight stretches of beach, Brittany has a rockier, more crinkled coastline, but is no less inspiring. Joanne Harris, author of bestsellers such as *Chocolat*, spent many childhood holidays at her grandfather's home at Vitré, east of Rennes, as well as the small island of Noirmoutier in Vendée. Travelling on the ferry



from Portsmouth to St-Malo, she spent much time exploring Brittany, and becoming inspired by it along the way.

Just inland from the island of Noirmoutier lies Nantes. Now officially no longer in Brittany, but Loire-Atlantique, it nevertheless used to be the home of the Dukes of Brittany and an author who inspired most childhood readers: Jules Verne.

Verne's childhood in this once busy ship-building port had a lot to do with his futuristic underwater adventures. The pull of the wider world was felt strongly by him, and he dreamt of sailing away on the big ships to go and explore. Although no longer bustling with the ship-building trade, the city has used the writer's works as inspiration for its wonderfully wacky *Machines de l'Île*, which include a giant steampunk elephant, while Nantes' setting between the coast and Paris makes it a popular place to live and maybe write that novel.

You want to join in? According to Patrick Joseph of My French House, in Brittany, the Côtes-d'Armor is the most popular *département* as it provides easy access thanks to the ferry at St-Malo, and airport at Dinard. He adds: "For good value, forget about a swimming pool, as people don't go to Brittany for the sun or posing by the pool." Normandy is an excellent alternative, he says, with the climate a bit milder, great value property, and closer to Paris. That said, if you forego the pool and the right-on-the-beach wish, then there are bargains still to be had, with average prices in the north around €150,000.

So, which literary neighbourhood offers the right inspiration for you? Bustling Paris, serene Provence or the wild north? ■

On the market

Normandy



€380,540: Eight-bedroom country home with glorious gardens and heated pool (Leggett Immobilier)



€152,000: Three-bedroom detached 'colombage' house with nearly an acre garden (La Résidence)

Brittany



€165,000: Three-bedroom house, currently divided into two dwellings, with landscaped gardens and a meadow (Sextant)



€349,800: 'Maison de maître' with additional architect-designed gîte, total 10-bedrooms, with a lovely garden and small field (Leggett)

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