Could it be a lesson in stone?

BY MARY ELLEN POLSON

After two weeks lifting stones in the South of France, I had never felt better in my life. We were building a terrace wall behind the kitchen at La Sabranenque, where I had just set a stone the size of a large toaster in place.

Unfortunately, my stay had done little to improve my graduate-school French. "Mal ou bon?" I asked of Gignoux, who stood a few feet below me. It was hard not to stare at his nose, which is the size and shape of an enormous, over-ripe strawberry. Stoop-shouldered and slightly frail, but still able to pick and load a wheelbarrow full of heavy stones, he considered my question for a moment, a sharp intelligence in his clear blue eyes.

I've been here before and I knew I shouldn't have asked so direct a question, in French or in English. The French consider it impolite to be so direct. But I was desperate to know whether I had chosen well, whether the stone I had eye-balled for the place in the wall was somehow right. Gignoux finally responded with a typically indirect answer. In French, of course: Gignoux, the Cyrano de Bergerac *des pierres* and founder of La Sabranenque, doesn't speak in English to volunteers, although it's a good bet that he understands a lot more of what we say than he lets on.

Anyway, I concluded that the stone was not right for the place I had chosen, or not *in* the right place. I had no doubt that Gignoux would find a home for it, here where stone is a she who responds to rolling, dipping, balancing, and in some cases, chipping (the technique is *tailleur*, the same as the word for tailor). This practitioner of *haute couture des pierres* has been doing this work for 40 years, and he has an impressive number of restorations to show for it.

The work at La Sabranenque consists of taking the stones and tiles that have fallen hip- or head-deep around a ruined medieval chapel, hilltop castle, or other indecipherable ruin, and rebuilding the structure anew almost entirely from the same materials—from rubble, in other words. In most cases, what's restored is an approximation of the original, representative of the original building techniques and useable today.

The author helped build an old terrace wall at La Sabranenque, a restoration organization based in a restored medieval village in Gard, in southern France. The gentle old donkey, Tenagay, has been a favorite of volunteers for more than 20 years.

The first and most successful of these medieval re-creations is the *vieux village* of Saint Victor la Coste, hidden away behind a high wall above the newer part of town. Walking under the vaulted clocktower into the old village, you feel an almost imperceptible passing from the present into the deep past. Traditional tile-roofed stone houses built on the footprints of 9th-, 10th-, and 11th-century ruins meander along the village's spine—that is, a stone path not much more than a meter or two wide. Doors open out onto the walk, and some steps dip deeply in the middle from centuries of wear. Above the

The author's husband, Jim, taps in *blockage* (a wedging stone) to bolster larger stones in the wall. Spring and fall projects are small and simple, like a 200-meter stone walk that meanders down to the town road. In summer, volunteers make great strides on large projects, such as a rampart reaching up to the now restored *castellas* above town.

arched door of one cottage, the grapevine still dangles: when my husband Jim and I spent two weeks in August here years ago, we'd throw open that door just to look at the grape clusters and twining leaves framing the view.

On our return last spring, we were shocked to realize our last, vividly remembered visit had been almost 20 years before. The team driver (Oops! project leader), Marc Simon, was still in residence, now missing half an ear and primarily involved with an international website consulting firm. A new project leader, Pascal—a Basque whom we volunteers called The Goat for his slight frame, sketchy goatee, and ability to disappear up or down almost vertical trails—guided us (and did much of the heavy lifting) on our work details. All of these practitioners in stone are unapologetically pre-Luddite.

"This is architecture without architects," Marc said one night at dinner. The process is totally organic. "The only way to understand this type of architecture is to do it."

During our first week, about 20 of us built a 200-meter stone walk linking the old village to the town road below. (It was during the second week that we added work on the terrace wall.) Just a few mornings of exposure to the tasks of selecting stones that ranged from the size of oyster shells to great lumps of overworked bread dough had turned us into connoisseurs of stone, à la Gignoux. I styled myself a Neolithic art director; and Jim, who had hurt his back, a soil engineer who could bend just enough to shovel dirt into buckets.

Our metabolisms revved up by daily doses of a few hours' manual labor, we all found the meals a highlight. Simple, local, and deliciously slow cooked, the food initially seemed almost ascetic given the modern emphasis on "luxury foods" we Americans take for granted.

Partly because we worked only during the mornings, taking hikes or trips to sites in the region in the afternoons, this trip marked quite a change from my first visit, in 1991. On many of those hot August afternoons, I lay on my bunk in my stone room after lunch, exhausted, growing anxious that I was missing out on the wonders of southern France as the days of my precious two-week vacation dwindled away. I listened enviously to kids in their 20s who'd spent the summer soaking up the sun in Crete, working the vineyards in Burgundy, and touring the Roman amphitheater in Orange, a tantalizingly short distance away.

In the middle of the last week, believing I wouldn't be happy unless I scored one of those precious sites, I had persuaded my reluctant husband to catch a bus to town, where we could explore Avignon—barely glimpsed on our way in—or perhaps some lovely city further afield, like Aix de Provence or Arles.

What followed was a pivotal moment in my life. I was happy on the bus to Avignon, the golden-walled city on the Rhone just 12 miles away from St. Victor. Jim, atypically quiet, was not.

It was the height of the tourist season. After the quiet rhythms of Saint Victor la Coste, we were shocked by the throngs of people jamming the town promenade. For some reason, the

Twenty years ago, the St. Victor *castellas* was a ruin filled hip deep with fallen stone. Now restored with elements like hand-tailored stone arches, some walls were stabilized but left incomplete, to picturesque effect.

Palace du Papes seemed gaudy and garishly lit. Jim tried to cheer me up on the famous *pont* that stretches to empty air over the Rhone, singing lines from the famous song: "Sur le pont d'Avignon/ L'on y danse tout en rond," but by then I was already in tears.

That night, we slept in an overpriced hotel room, after a meal at a Michelin-recommended restaurant (2 forks) where the chef put mustard in every dish and never stopped yelling at his assistants during the entire two-hour meal. I couldn't figure out why I was so miserable. Then I asked Jim why he hadn't wanted to leave La Sabranenque. "It's the real France," he said.

I never made it to Orange, at least on that trip. We took the bus back to St. Victor the next morning. No one seemed to notice, or care, that we'd left.

Sometimes you don't know how important a decision is until days, weeks, or even years after you've lived it. Mercifully, some of the terrible mistakes I made in my 20s don't seem to matter much any more. But certain moments at La Sabranenque resonate throughout my life. I never fully made the connection between the work there and the work I do for *Old-House Interiors* and *Arts & Crafts Homes* until I returned to France last June.

Our work, and what we put into our work, is what lasts—even if no one remembers who we are or were, or that we made it. No one has any idea who the individuals were who built the stone walls at La Sabranenque. When enough time has passed, no one will know who restored them, either. But it's enough that the work endures.

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On the last day of our first visit nearly 20 years ago, Jim and I and a friendly woman named Vicki were hustling to complete part of a low wall at the old castle at Gicon (since completely restored). It was the last day of August, the last day of our summer. Somehow, the three of us couldn't find the right stones to fit the irregular three-dimensional puzzle under our hands.

After weeks of drought, the sky darkened, rain was imminent, and then large drops were suddenly falling. Gignoux, younger then but still, to me, quite old, urged us to finish up quickly, *avec vitesse* . . . a brief pause as we struggled, unable to comprehend what he could so easily see. So he reached in with both hands, took a couple of stones, and dropped them deftly into place with a bit of mortar. "Eh, voilá," he said. ■