

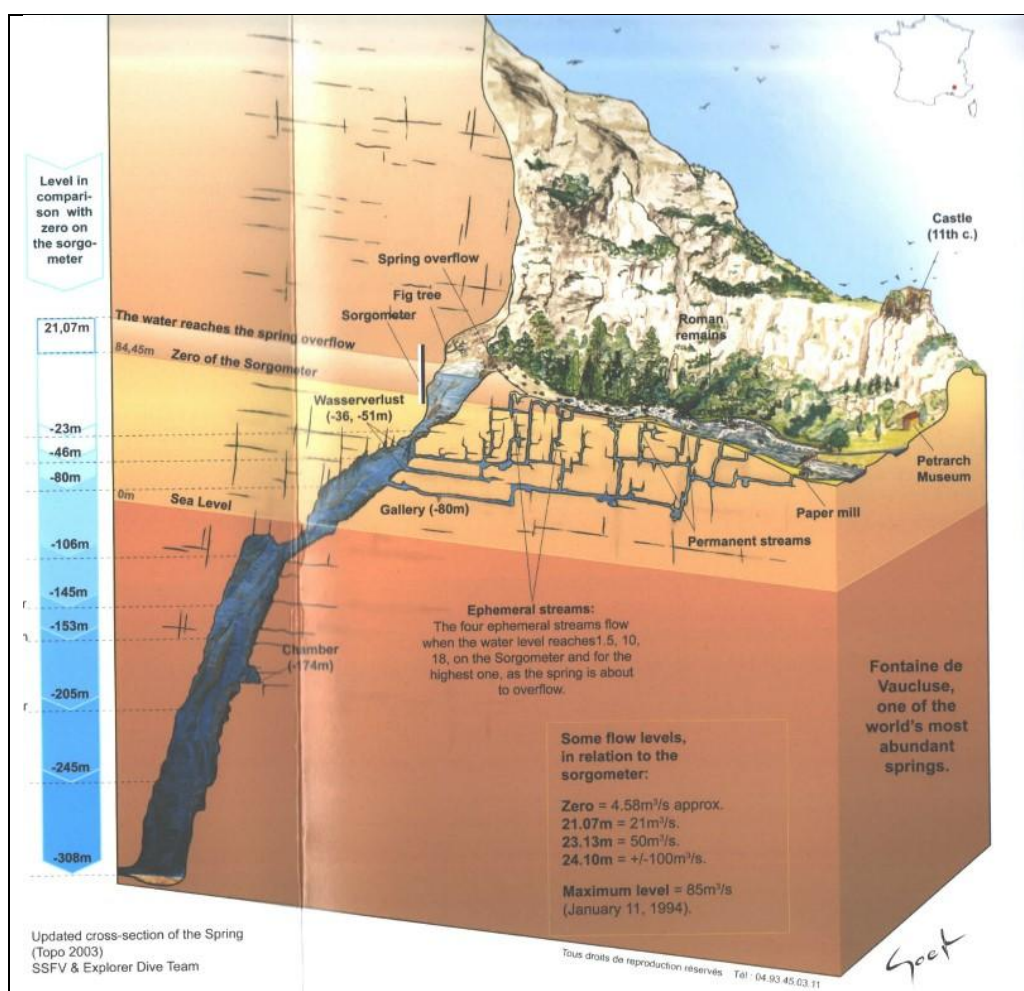
Walking in Provence

Ivor New

Last September my wife Jo, my brother, and I decided a couple of weeks of leisurely walking in the autumn sunshine of Provence would be an excellent idea. What could be better than strolling gently from village to village with temperatures in the low twenties with just the exquisite countryside for company and the thought of lunch as a distraction?

Come the event it was not quite like that. The temperature was an unseasonal 30+ degrees, which in sparsely wooded limestone countryside was hotter than I care to remember. Not surprisingly much of the walking was replaced by sitting in the shade testing the quality of Provençal cuisine. This was excellent, if a bit pricy – with the extended lunches we not only blew the budget but had to expand our belts!

We stayed in the Luberon at Fontaine de Vaucluse. Our hotel was an old mill but there was little to indicate this except several water channels and a large iron flange that was most likely part of a turbine inflow pipe. However, the setting was idyllic and the food good.



The Fontaine is a very impressive geological feature which following winter rains provides the main drain for the aquifer beneath the local limestone plateau and is considered the source of the river Sorgue. At the mouth of the Fontaine cavern the seasonal change in water level is massive, the lowest recorded level is 22.3m below the fountain's cill and the highest 2.73m above it. The reason for this is that there are a multitude of smaller springs in the river's headwaters and the Fontaine acts as an overflow.



The number of days in a year that the water overflows the cill varies considerably. The maximum number of days in recent times is 198 in 1977, following heavy winter snows, and the minimum is only 2 days in 2007. There is no obvious trend but the local feeling was that this could be taken as an indicator of global warming.

Low and high water flow at the Fontaine cavern



Now the mills bit. The Sorgue is a significant river and with the Luberon aquifer acting as a reservoir, a considerable flow is maintained all year. The locals seem proud of their milling heritage as there are water wheels and weirs up and down the river.

Most of these wheels are undershot and just idle round on their shafts as the buildings they served have long been converted to meet other needs.

In Fontaine de Vaucluse the one exception is the paper mill which still operates in a traditional manner but only makes small batches of specialised paper. The most noteworthy is the manufacture of small batches of chemically unique rag paper that is used when producing important documents like international treaties. While we were there the wheel was idling round (being fed from one of the small springs lower down the valley) and the row of trip hammers used to pulverise the rag into its fibres was not being operated.



Paper mill wheel and trip hammers

The local town is L'Isle-sur-la-Sorgue which must once have been like a Provençal version of a Pennine mill town. The Sorgue splits into several branches, one of which flows beside a major road through the town. There is a weir that diverts water into a leat that flows in a tunnel under the road to feed several small ponds. Each has sluice gates to divert water to wheels, some of which are still turning in small fenced areas in the pavement.



L'Isle-sur-la-Sorgue weir and a typical road side wheel

The final surprise was to find the ruin of a post mill beside the path we were walking along on our way to lunch. The mill consisted of a small conical tower with a door in the base and a stone slab at its top. It was situated in a col (which is now largely covered in trees) and a local sign said it was Le Petit Moulin. The slab on top was clearly a recent addition so it could easily be the base of a simple post mill. When I got home I Googled 'French post mill' to check its provenance and it seems that the differences between town and country is alive and well, as shown in the pictures!



2 French style post mills, Le Petit Moulin (*left*) and an up-market urban example