



Garden gates lead to the six-acre estate that Virginia Ward and Casey Gaines, below, fell in love with in 2005 — and someday will call home.

# NEW BEGINNINGS

*A St. Petersburg couple renovates a stunning century-old farmhouse in the French countryside, soaking in local customs and dreaming of the future*

BY KIMBERLEY LOVATO PHOTOGRAPHY BY LOUIS LESKO

**W**ithout furniture, rugs or artwork to absorb the voices, echoes ping-pong off the empty walls and pale stone tiles. A ladder stands open in the middle of the sunny living room and the smell of new paint permeates the air. Virginia Ward and Casey Gaines of Tierra Verde stare at an empty built-in bookcase, heads tilted and eyes squinted, and debate the color they have chosen. After numerous trips to the local hardware store, they



agree they have finally concocted the perfect shade of blue-gray.

Though their furnishings so far consist of one lone chair and a bed, the 1,900-square-foot house in Vaison-la-Romaine, France, is far from empty. One only has to watch Ward carefully hang the “bienvenue” (welcome) sign on the kitchen door to realize the house is full — of plans for the future. Not only are they putting the finishing touches on a house, but also on their dream of retiring to France someday.



Charming accents grace the Vaison-la-Romaine estate, from a cozy quilt to rustic shutters laced with greenery.





The storybook streets  
of the French town  
wind through 2,000  
years of history.

A riverside castle stands guard amid the rolling hills and vineyards of northern Provence.



When that someday will commence is still up in the air. Gaines, 58, a neurosurgeon at Bayfront Medical Center in St. Petersburg, is ready anytime. But Ward, 46, is still passionate about her practice as a plastic surgeon, and jokes she needs to work longer than she went to medical school. But until the day arrives, the doctors are taking steps toward a life spent half the year in this 2,000-year-old riverside town, and half the year in their ultra-modern waterfront Florida home that Gaines built 19 years ago.

“There is something magical about new beginnings,” says Gaines.

Driving in through the garden gates of the 150-year-old country house, it’s easy to fall under the spell. Amid the rolling hills and vineyards of northern Provence, an ancient castle standing guard in the distance, the Gaines-Ward home is surrounded by six acres of land dotted with prolific almond, chestnut and cherry trees. From the pool there is not a neighbor in sight. Trellises dripping wisteria create irresistible outdoor dining corners. Two wild pheasants occasionally dash across the garden, reminding the couple how far removed they are from their hurried existence back in Florida. Ward walks over to a cherry tree and pops the succulent red fruit into her mouth. “I can’t believe this is ours,” she says, looking around. “This is the good life.”

### Land of Dreams

When Gaines and Ward first saw the house in November 2005, it met all their criteria: in a country setting, but close to a town chock full of cultural events, and near the region’s highest point, the Mont Ventoux. The couple had been talking about buying a house for four years — and seriously looking for two. They took possession in May 2006.

But the real French plans began more than 10 years ago, before the couple even met. Gaines was slowly inching toward a life in France, with frequent visits to the region and years of intense language study, both in Florida and at the CERAN Institute in Avignon, when he was set up on a blind date with Ward in 1999. Ward had never been to Paris, but had promised herself she would go for her 40th birthday. She kept her promise, and Gaines accompanied her. “It was perfect,” she says. “The man I loved, in a beautiful city on my 40th birthday — I couldn’t have dreamed it better.”

They’ve been married for six years now, during which time Ward has been studying French and exploring the region with her husband. Gaines admits that while he knew he wanted to be in France, it would have been tough to do it alone. “I’m glad I found someone to share it with and who shares my passion for France,” he says, smiling at Ward.

Tuesday is market day in Vaison-la-Romaine, with a bounty of food and wine, neighborhood camaraderie and impromptu concerts.

For both, there is no question that, ultimately, retired life will be better in Europe.

“The French have a different attitude where it concerns the aged and retired,” says Gaines. “They appreciate daily life and attempt to live life in the moment.” No doubt, this lifestyle will be different, perhaps even slower, for these busy doctors. In Florida both work full-time, play tennis, study French, and in between manage to make time for each other, their friends and family, and their two cats. But as is the French way, retirement will not mean stopping; rather, they see it as starting over.

Gaines would like to attend the university in Avignon and study paleontology, while Ward, who has worked since she was 12 years old, says, “I just want to *be*.” Painting is on the top of her list. Reading is up there, too, as is starting a vegetable garden, a hobby she watched her father cultivate. She and Gaines already are enrolled in a weeklong cooking class this summer hosted by famed chef Patricia Wells, who also calls Vaison La Romaine home.

“Life will be different,” says Ward, “but I am looking forward to it.”

She already has come to know some of the vendors at the Tuesday market in Vaison-la-Romaine. As the town pulses with both locals and tourists, Ward expertly winds her way through the narrow streets. Lavender soaps are a must, she says, picking up a purple bar and breathing in its scent. Further on, a flannel-shirted man selling cheese offers a sliver from his knife; Ward buys a half a kilo of his homemade delicacy. Ripe red fruit and baked bread are abundant, along with freshly caught fish and meat cut to order. Ward picks up a pink straw basket in which to carry her goods, including a throw rug for her kitchen, as an impromptu accordion concert strikes up nearby.

“This is something you just don’t get at Publix,” laughs Ward, referring to the convivial atmosphere of market day.

Back at the house, she lays out the new rug on her kitchen floor while Gaines chats in French with the gardener. It’s clear that for this couple the appeal of retirement is the thrill of a new beginning and the challenge of the unknown.

“In the end of my life, I picture a baseball game and I am running full speed for home plate,” Gaines smiles. “The crowd is cheering and my teammates are waving me on. The ball is thrown and I slide into home in a big cloud of dust.”

Safe or out, he says, it doesn’t matter.

“We’re just here to play the game.” ❖





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