



DECOR TOURS  
*Provence*

## PROVENCE DISPATCH

### *No. 5: Le Bleu Historique*

Like a parent who can't say who their favorite child is, we'd never tell you that one day of our Provence experience is any better than any other...but just between us, we LOVE our woad-dyeing day.

# Rhapsodies in Blue

When we tell people we're going to spend a good portion of the day dyeing things blue, mild enthusiasm is the typical response. So we thought we'd try to convey some of what makes this day so special...

## Once-in-a-Lifetime Experience

Our dyemaster, Denise Lambert, almost single-handedly brought woad, the blue dye used in Europe for thousands of years, back from extinction. If you've ever heard of French Blue, woad is the source for this famed color.

Denise is recognised around the world as the leading expert in this historic dye, from the cultivation of the woad plant, to the process of creating the raw dye material, developing innovative uses for the dyestuff, and, of course, the actual dyeing of textiles.. She has consulted with museums to help identify ancient woad textiles and develop techniques for preservation and repair, and is regularly

hired by fashion designers to dye both fabrics and finished pieces for limited editions. So we're not overstating the fact that we'll be working with a living master of this craft. It's like learning to cook *coq au vin* from Julia Child!

Denise will provide a more in-depth history of woad before we start dyeing for the day, and she'll also go over techniques to help make sure we get the most out of the day's (sometimes finicky) dye vats



## A Bit of History

As mentioned, woad is the original European blue dye, a plant that grows wild from the Mediterranean to Scandinavia. Long before indigo made its way along with Indo-Asian trade routes, Europe used the blue of woad, combined with the two other core dye colors—madder for red and safflower or weld for yellow—to create an entire palette.

The center of woad production in Europe was Toulouse, about 200 miles southwest of where we'll be staying. Between 1450 and 1600, *pasteliers*, as those in the woad trade were

called, from Toulouse to Albi to Carcas-  
sonne, ran a thriving businesses based  
on this “blue gold” and transformed  
Toulouse into a wealthy trading center.  
The color had such an impact on the  
entire region that to this day the colors  
of blue (the dye) and yellow (the woad  
plant in flower) are inherently associated  
with Provence. The color was not only  
used as a dye for fabrics, but as also as a  
paint, giving its name to many variations  
of Provençal Blues used on shutters and  
doors throughout the region.



However, once the less expensive indigo  
dye became readily available, the culti-  
vation and processing of woad fell out of favor, and almost completely disap-  
peared. It was briefly revived by Napoléon who wanted a true French Blue for  
his army's uniforms. After 1815, woad production once again disdisappeared.  
For Denise, this meant years of hunting down historic texts, trying to discov-  
er the extraction process, while simultaneously experiementing with her own  
methods, based on what little evidence she could find.

“Woad is a capricious blue, but it has extraordinary qualities,” says Denise. “It’s  
definitely a form of alchemy!”

And as you see fabrics come out of the  
vat bright yellow-green, transition to  
turquoise, before turning blue, you’ll  
have to agree with Denise that woad  
dyeing is indeed something mysterious  
and magical.





## *Lean Into Transformation*

We can honestly say that time spent woad dyeing is transformative experience. The most obvious is that what you put into the vats is different by the end of day, but it's more than that. You have to be willing to give up some control, be patient, and ultimately, be ok with random or unexpected results. It's a process that, if you give into it, can reset your outlook...at least for a short time! Because there is a point at which the fabric won't take any more dye. It might not be the color you want, but you have to accept that the content of the fabric and the state of the vat dictates the color – not the person dying it!



## Dye Day Prep

To help you get the most of your time with Denise, we've have a list of suggestions and recommendations.

**1** The best fibers for woad are cotton, linen, viscose/rayons, including all the new versions(!), and, with some caveats, silk. Each of these will take the dye differently, so if you have a piece that has a combination of these fibers—say a cotton body with rayon trim—it can produce some really wonderful results.

**2** Wool, cashmere, alpaca, etc. items can also be dyed, but please let us know ahead of time, as wool requires a different dye preparation and it's own vat.

**3** While a solid weave item will be lovely, consider damasks and other textured constructions, as again, the different layers and weaves etc, will result in range of blues within a single piece.



**4** While this might trickier to confirm or narrow down, if you have any items that have mixed fiber construction, meaning the thread is a mix of cotton and rayon or rayon and linen, etc; or mixed weave construction, meaning the warp is one construction and the weft is a different construction, this also creates some fascinating results.

**5** If bringing something new, make sure to wash it well, several times, and make sure you also rinse it well to get rid of any lingering soap. Use the most “neutral” detergent available, and do not dry with softener or fragrance sheets.

**6** If bringing something old, take the time to examine it for any old stains and do your best to remove them. Dyeing will NOT cover stains or bleach marks, they will just show up as darker or lighter blues, so do your best to even them out with the rest of the piece. Again, thoroughly launder to make sure any cleaning residue is removed.

**7** Do not bring anything you cannot stand to “lose”. See the note above regarding unexpected results. If it has historic, sentimental, or other value, realize that you cannot control what will come out of the vat.



**8** Flat items, such as pieces of fabric, are the easiest to dye. This is because anything with an “opening”—pillowcases, shirts/dresses that do not fully unbutton/open, pants, etc.—usually get air bubbles when lowered into the vat, and require some extra finessing. This does not mean you shouldn't

bring anything like this if you want, it just means you need to take extra time and consideration throughout the process.

**9** Anything that is gathered, ruched, pleated, etc., will also dye unevenly. Meaning if you have pants with a gathered elastic waistband, you'll see light-colored sections left when the elastic is extended. Again, not to say these

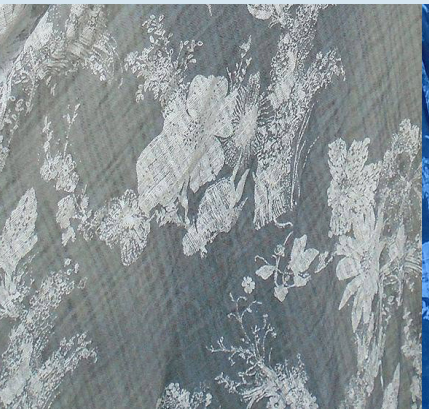
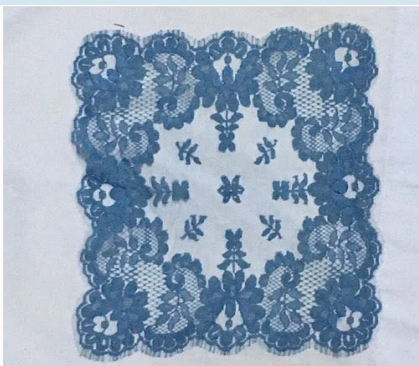
can't be dyed and these marks can be minimized or eliminated, it just means paying more attention during the process.

**10** Think beyond fabric. Bring some cotton canvas shoes or a tote bag, wooden servingware, feathers, etc. Woad is food safe and anything porous will accept at least some dye!

**11** Think of reinventing keepsakes. One guest brought a batch of family crocheted items—trim from old pillowcases, doilies, etc. and dyed them all in various shades of blue



to add to new pillows, throws, skirts, etc. Another brought old shell and mother-of-pearl buttons, which she then used for jewelry, clothing, etc. One guest brought vintage lace and linen handkerchiefs to dye blue, one for each of her granddaughters for their “something blue” wedding day item. Woad can truly transform blah or tucked away into a drawer items into something you truly love.



**12** Think about color-over-color, or color-over-pattern. If you have something that already has a printed pattern on a ground that could absorb the color, pink flowers on a yellow ground for example, take a chance to see what could happen!



**13** If you do bring small items—buttons, pieces of trim, etc.—there will be a smaller bucket set up, but it will also help if you bring a small lingerie laundry bag to help corral your items while in the dye. It makes fishing them out much easier!

**14** If you don't feel you have anything in your closets or stashed away you'd like to experiment with, shop the end-of-summer sales for linen and/or cotton pieces, scope out Ebay, ThredUp, or other resale sites. And,

on Sunday, our first full day in Provence, we'll be heading to the Isle-sur-la-Sorgue market, which will have new, vintage, and antique linens, trims, scarves and clothing suitable for dyeing.

**15** If you're interested in creating pattern with the dye vat—through folding, twisting, tying, stitching, etc.—take some time ahead of our trip to do some research online and see what patterns you'd like to try and create. We will have some materials on hand, but if you want your own shibori marbles or other special items, either bring them along, or create your dye bundles to bring with you.

And, we can't stress this enough, have at least one more piece than you think you want. . . because inevitably, people end up running back to their rooms to find more to dye!

a bientot,  
Deb and Susan





In the next issue of the  
**PROVENCE  
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*No. 6: Les indiennes*

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