

## Make a beeline

Chances are you've never heard of bee tourism, but the buzz is growing. And while it is a niche concept, 'apitourism' offers everything the thoughtful traveller seeks – from meeting passionate locals to experiencing one-of-a-kind tours



HELEN TRUSZKOWSKI MEGÈVE, FRANCE

**I** get that many people view bees with vehement disdain, but in recent years dwindling bee colonies have caused a huge shift in opinions with beehives sprouting up on rooftops, and in parks and gardens around the country.

It was on a weekend trip to California that I first discovered an affinity with bees. It is hard to exaggerate the (dare I say it) buzz you get when you get up close and personal with a hive full of bees. At Carmel Valley Ranch, I was invited to tentatively zip myself into a bee suit from waist to chin, pull a mesh hood over my head and get right in the thick of it. Remaining calm, I was told, was the key. Enveloped inside a cocoon of cotton, I entered a world of peace, of simplicity, a sort of timelessness. The imposed silence, punctuated only by the puff of the smokers and rhythmic hum of the bees, was mesmerizing.

That chance encounter brought out the kale-swigging hipster in me. Back home I began taking beekeeping classes, learning all I could about honey harvesting and honeybee deaths. Simply put, honeybees live in large, organized colonies of around 50,000 worker bees. Honeybees differ from bumblebees, which live in much smaller colonies (generally around 120 workers), and from solitary bees that are – by definition – primarily solitary. While the bumblebee and honeybee both produce honey, honeybees produce far more of the sweet stuff. They're the real "cash cows" of the insect world. The problem is, widespread use of pesticides has taken an enormous toll on the population of the planet's pollinators. Last year, American beekeepers alone lost 42 per cent of their honeybee colonies. Without a healthy bee population, most foods we rely on could disappear altogether. That's quite some buzzkill.

Well, there was one way to take the sting out of the news: bee tourism. Meeting fellow bee fanatics in an exciting new destination seemed like a sweet move. And I wasn't alone.

[Bees, Page 4](#)

## Bees: Adventures on the honey trail from Paris to Seattle

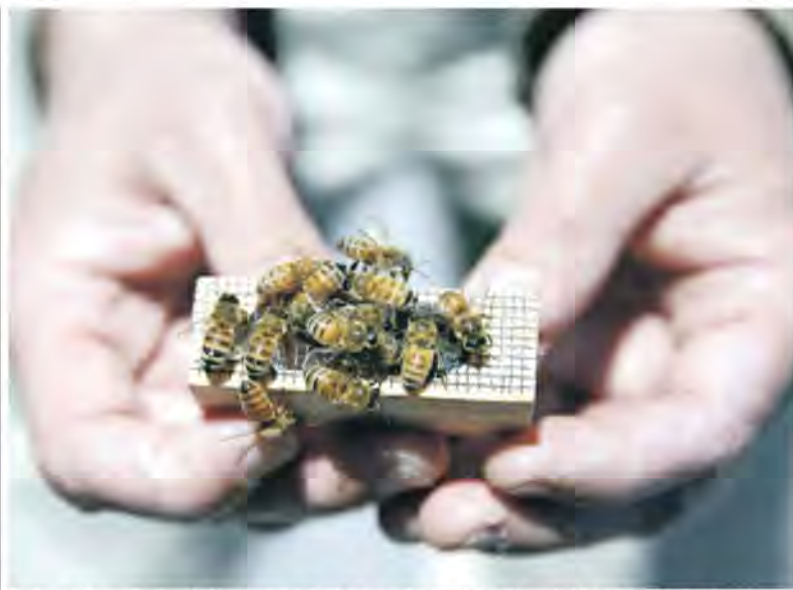
» Turns out each year thousands of tourists visit the local Bees Museum in Ayer Keroh, Malaysia, and join the traditional Mawals, or honey gatherers, of Bangladesh on guided tours through the mangrove forests seeking out giant honeybee nests. Since 2000, Trinidad and Tobago beekeepers have hosted personalized beekeeper safaris. Now local bee excursions are springing up in Britain, Malta, Slovenia, Turkey, Sardinia and even as far away as Uganda.

With the rise of all things eco, the idea of "apitourism" may seem too niche in its focus. Look deeper though and it's all-encompassing in what it offers the discerning traveller: meeting locals passionate about their trade; sampling the insect's artisanal honey and its myriad of byproducts (from crayons and candles, beer and bee pollen to cosmetics and candy); even exploring hives found at the heights of a city's skyscrapers or the heart of natural landscapes, all just the spinoffs of spending time with bees.

I set my sights on bee royalty. The real deal. In France, bees have historically been the focus of a deep-rooted sustainable living culture and a sense of national pride. After huge protests across France, earlier this year lawmakers went above and beyond European Union restrictions to approve plans to ban widely used pesticides blamed for harming bees.

With some inheritance money to invest, I began daydreaming about owning my own corner of France, spending lazy summers with the kids, foregoing bikini waxes, sipping wine and small-batch preserving my own *miel de trèfle* (clover honey).

Piggy bank raided, I landed right in the centre of bee tourism, gastronomy and the geographical heart of Europe: Paris. Counterintuitive as it may seem, bees actually do best in the city. As enlightened as ever, the City of Light declared itself a pesticide-free zone back in 2000. And as early as 2005, the Union Nationale de l'Apiculture Française encouraged urban bee-



Beekeeper Roger Garrison holds a container with a queen bee inside on the roof of the W Hotel in San Francisco, one of the growing number of hotels around the world that have adopted beekeeping programs. ERC/RSBERG/AP

keeping (the largest such project in the world), and bee colonies are thriving in Paris.

Not that it's free room and board; the critters sure earn their keep. While honeybees have resided on the roof of Paris's opera house for 25 years, I discovered the rooftop beehive at Mandarin Oriental Paris held 50,000 busy bees. Last year's sweet haul (some 60 pounds) found its way into the restaurant recipes: from delicate flaky pastries to honey-based cocktails.

Of course, France for all its liberality, prosperity and spontaneity is a country that was overwhelmingly rural until the start of the 20th century. Now that they have everything, many Parisians hanker for the simpler life.

Seeking my own derelict country house for sale, I rented a car and followed the Parisian's weekend-getaway lead. Slicing my way southeast towards the Rhône-Alps region, I entered

honey nirvana. As I zipped past fields dotted with beehives and gnarled olive trees, I stuck out my hand and brushed past the undergrowth. The dense scent of lavender and thyme filled the car.

Passing old villas crumbling elegantly with their peeling turquoise shutters, I chanced upon the quintessential postcard village of Megève. The early evening light was honeyed and mellow, the scenery otherworldly. Cream-puff clouds dotted the sky, highlighting the colossal Mont Blanc massif. A jumble of streets converged on a cobblestone town square dominated by a domed 14th-century church, swish boutiques and stone footbridges over a babbling river. Jaunty horse-drawn calèches clustered in the square and kids played boules, their parents idling outside the chocolatier sipping café crème. Just steps away from the village centre, I met an elderly man

tending an old Savoyard covered apiary. Its classic, cedar-box design stowed wooden frames laden with honeycomb, and each was tipped with a tiny tin roof. We chatted in broken French and I asked where I could find the best food in town.

He directed me to the three-Michelin-starred Flocons de Sel, where chef Emmanuel Renaud served up fresh, unpretentious and obsessively local dishes. Renaud sources all his ingredients from regional producers: lake fishermen, Beaufort cheesemakers, Valais wine growers and local beekeepers.

Standing serene and detached just outside Megève's central hub, my stopoff for the night was Les Fermes de Marie. The five-star hotel is essentially a clutch of interconnected, centuries-old farmhouses rescued from imminent dilapidation and relocated here beam-by-beam stone-by-stone by its loving owners, the Sibuet family. All-

natural is their thing. So much so its spa treatments are based entirely around the healing power of alpine plants and (yep, you guessed it) honey.

As I stepped up my ramble through France I met more and more artisans, expert queen bee breeders, fellow api-enthusiasts, as well as organic farmers hooked on slow-food production and green living. Brought together by the humble bumblebee, I was smitten by the idea of a holiday that was as good for me as it was for the people and places I encountered; where I was welcomed by locals, not simply endured by them.

In the end, my bee trail took me full circle back to California. A chance stopover in Seattle sent me into the expert hands of executive chef Gavin Stephenson. Not only does he make the indefatigable blend of urban beekeeper and chef appear simple, his lack of pretension makes such simplicity a virtue. Back in 2009, Stephenson spearheaded a rooftop bee program at the city's Fairmont Olympic Hotel. Since then, the project has grown to 18 staggered pastel-hued hives producing a whopping 600-pound honey harvest last year.

The chef drizzles his honey on overstuffed muffins and salmon, jars of rooftop honey are given to guests and tangy local cheese is melted by ribbons of the sticky stuff.

He has even partnered with local brewery Pike Brewing Company to concoct a honey-infused ale. His inspiration? "Doing the right thing," he told me. "Bees are very delicate."

While it's no secret bees are in trouble, their importance can't be underplayed. "Every third bite of food you put in your mouth, a bee had something to do with," Stephenson told me. Which makes planning a holiday around them a win-win – and the buzz worth the hype.

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*The writer was a guest of the Mandarin Oriental Paris, Les Fermes de Marie and received a discounted rate at the Fairmont Olympic Hotel.*