

Class on the Côte

It could be argued that tourism was invented on the Côte d'Azur, where eighteenth century British aristocrats came to escape the winters of their homeland. Today, the French Riviera remains as popular as ever. What could be its secret?

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More than three hundred days of sun each year



“When I realised I would be seeing this light every morning, I could hardly believe my luck,” wrote Henri Matisse during a visit to the Côte d’Azur in 1917. The artist had planned to stay for a few days, but that soon turned into several months. Matisse’s enduring love for the south coast led him to return frequently. Eventually, he took up permanent residence in Cimiez, a ‘très chic’ area of Nice.

For centuries, artists have been drawn to the south of France. Legendary painters such as Vincent van Gogh, Claude Monet, Pablo Picasso and Auguste Renoir never seemed to tire of the southern light. The sun shines more than 300 days a year here, making the landscape glow in an incomparable manner. The sun’s rays embrace all those who care to bask in them, and the light makes everything just a little bit more beautiful.

The centre of Nice lies within walking distance of the coast and the airport lies at the end of the famous Promenade des Anglais (‘la Prom’), just five kilometres from the centre. Renting a Vélo Bleu allows you to cycle through town for no more than a euro a day. Along the coast lies a bicycle path, part of the Piste Cyclable du Littoral, that will connect Marseille to the Italian border when it is completed.

With a population of 350,000, Nice is the fifth largest city in France. Contrary to popular

opinion, this is a very lively town and certainly not just for pensioners. In fact, 50% of Nice’s inhabitants are younger than 40. Beach pavilions, bustling with activity from the early dawn until late at night, come in all shapes and sizes: from sophisticated and fashionable to unremarkably cosy, and everything in between – not unlike the 17 million people who visit the two hundred kilometres of coast between Menton and Hyères each year. Yet in spite of this annual invasion, the Côte never seems to become vulgar.

Dreams on the sea

Immediately behind the Quai des Etats-Unis (an extension of the Promenade des Anglais), against the hill on which the Chateau de Nice is situated, lies Vieux-Nice (Old Nice). There’s always something to do here.

On the Cours Saléya you can find the most beautiful flowers and delicious olives, all delivered fresh each day, except on Mondays when the antique and bric-à-brac dealers take over. The market closes at noon and the entire Cours is transformed into a large terrace. When in Vieux-Nice, do make sure to visit Maison Auer – just across from the opera – which sells wonderful candied fruits. Its overwhelming baroque interior alone is worth the trip.

Historic hotels

The French Riviera with its breathtaking views, secluded coves and gorgeous beaches is without doubt one of the finest coastal regions in Europe. All around lie charming villages and bustling cities. There’s no shortage of pleasant hotels, such as Le Négresco in Nice and the Intercontinental Carlton and the Grand Hyatt Hôtel Martinez in Cannes.

However, the most mythical of all is the Hotel du Cap Eden Roc, frequented by many of the most famous names in recent history. Elizabeth Taylor had her luggage delivered by the truckload there. After all, in such a classy-yet-relaxed environment, one simply has to appear at the dining table in suitably stylish attire. >



↗
Each year, some 17 million people visit the ‘blue coast’. However, you can still come across quiet beaches populated by locals.

→
The elegant town of Menton, along the Italian border, is said to be the warmest spot along the coast.



Discover the Côte's breathtaking views, secluded coves and gorgeous beaches

Destination Côte d'Azur





Destination Côte d'Azur



another musical note: in France, the longest day of the year is entirely dedicated to music. The Fête de la Musique is celebrated everywhere across the country.

Coffee and croissants

If you're not staying in Saint-Tropez, do make sure to rise early one day and visit its famous market. This is held at the Place des Lices from seven to one o'clock every Tuesday and Saturday morning. At this large market, which is typical of the Provence region, you can find everything from local delicacies, summer dresses and ubiquitous lavender to the familiar 'Tropézienne' sandals, which have been made in the town for almost a century.

Why not do as the French do and start your day with a cup of coffee and a croissant on one of the pavement cafés before strolling past the stalls? A walk past the 'super yachts' of 'Saint-Trop' is highly recommended. Alternatively, you can watch them from the terrace of Le Sénéquier, originally a patisserie started by Marie and Martin Sénéquier in 1887, when Saint-Tropez was just another fishing village. In 1930, Marie began a café of the same name in the adjacent building. The rest, as they say, is history: the café, with its characteristic red director's chairs, has become an institution. >

Located on the tip of the Antibes peninsula, the Grand Hotel du Cap is among the fanciest establishments on the French south coast. Originally named Villa Soleil and built as a private residence for Hippolyte de Villemessant, founder of newspaper Le Figaro, the building was purchased by Italian hotelier Antoine Sella eight years after its construction was completed. In 1889, the Grand Hotel du Cap opened its doors to the public.

Celebrities are all around, especially during the Cannes Film Festival, but pointing at them is considered slightly vulgar. The Hotel du Cap Eden Roc guestbook includes names such as Karl Lagerfeld, Tom Cruise and Madonna, as well as several members of the Windsor family.

All that jazz

The Eden Roc is also the ideal spot from which to enjoy one of the Côte's most famous musical events: Jazz à Juan. This jazz festival, held in Antibes and Juan-les-Pins, began in 1960 and was the world's first festival of its kind. Many of the biggest names in jazz have appeared here, including Ella Fitzgerald, Miles Davis and Fats Domino. At this year's edition – held from 11 to 20 July – Stevie Wonder, Gregory Porter and George Benson will be appearing. On

Facing page:

Many villages hold weekly markets during the summer. A few hours at Saint-Raphael antiques market can result in some great finds.

Below:

A leisurely stroll along the quay is the best way to see the stars and 'super yachts' – both are permanent fixtures of the Côte d'Azur.

Places to see

Fondation Vasarely

Museum dedicated to the works of Victor Vasarely, in Aix-en-Provence. fondationvasarely.fr

Villa Ephrussi de Rothschild

Baroness de Rothschild's rose-colored villa and gardens in Saint-Jean-Cap-Ferrat are open to the public. villa-efrussi.com

Fondation Maeght

Modern art museum in Saint-Paul-de-Vence. fondation-maeght.com

L'Abbaye du Thoronet

Former Cistercian abbey, now restored as a museum. thoronet.monuments-nationaux.fr





Best star spotting

1 Hotel du Cap Eden Roc
 Very grand indeed, this hotel in Antibes is invariably fully booked during the annual film festival – held in the third week of May. The biggest Hollywood stars stay at this hotel, which is open from April to October.
Boulevard JF Kennedy, Antibes
hotel-du-cap-eden-roc.com

2 Le Sénèque
 The super yachts on the quay, people parading by and many famous faces (half hidden behind large sunglasses) make this terrace the most spectacular in France, possibly even Europe.
Quai Jean-Jaurès, Saint-Tropez
senequier.com



This is the perfect spot from which to keep an eye on the super yachts moored right outside, in the company of celebrities. Kate Moss, Cindy Crawford, Patrick Bruel, Princess Stephanie and George Clooney are all regular visitors to the Côte d'Azur's most famous terrace.

A small paradise

During winter, the island of Porquerolles is home to 300 inhabitants. In the high season, however, some ten thousand visitors are welcomed each day. The island, where cars are forbidden and buildings are few, has always remained a small paradise, as pristine and rural as the entire Côte d'Azur must have been a century ago.

Discovering its twelve square kilometres by bike is an excellent idea, but even better is to just start walking. 'Slow travel' is the ideal way to take in all of the lovely beaches.

Towards the end of the day, head westward towards the criques to see the Europe's most beautiful sunset. Even the crickets become silent, allowing absolute tranquility to descend – perfect peace and quiet, just a stones' throw away from bustling Nice and Saint-Tropez.

So what is the secret of the Côte? Its light, climate, beauty and atmosphere all contribute to its success. In the end, however, unbeatable diversity is what appears to make the world's most famous coastal region so unique. ■

Places to sleep

2 Le Négresco
 With its private beach, gourmet restaurant and stunning art, the Négresco hotel is in a class of its own. 91-year-old proprietress Jeanne Augier personally makes sure that Le Négresco continues to be the best hotel in the world.
37 Promenade des Anglais, Nice
hotel-negresco-nice.com


3 La Ponche
 One of Simone de Beauvoir and Françoise Sagan's favourite sea-front hotels, this former fishermen's tavern, has been enlarged and embellished over the years.
5 rue des Remparts, Saint-Tropez
laponche.com

Places to eat

4 Chez Bruno
 The most famous truffle restaurant in the south of France can be found in Lorgues. It lies in the Provence, north of the motorway linking Aix-en-Provence to Nice. Well worth the hour's drive from the coast: the food and the ambience are of the highest quality.
Route des Arcs, Lorgues
restaurantbruno.com



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