

THE HEART AND SOUL OF THE CÔTE D'AZUR

With 300 days of sunshine a year, and just a short hop from London's main airports thanks to frequent BA flights, Nice and beyond are the perfect escapist playground all year round

From its golden beaches to its charming villages, the Côte d'Azur is possibly the most famous stretch of coastline in the world. This sun-dappled corner of southeast France has been made immortal over the years by countless artists and writers who have been inspired by the region's alluring light, intoxicating colour palette and poetic nature. Read on to discover some of the French Riviera's most beloved hot spots, all easily accessible from Nice airport.

TAKE A DIP: BOUNTIFUL BEACHES

Stretching from Bandol in the west to Menton in the east, the Côte d'Azur is made up of 700km of dramatic coastline. Needless to say, there is no shortage of stunning beaches, each with its own personality, to enjoy along the way. The long arc of sand that is Plage des Marinieres is one of the coastline's prettiest public beaches, framed by undulating hills and a mediaeval fortress. Found between Monaco and the buzzing city of Nice, it's a short walk into the old town of Villefranche-sur-Mer, with its pastel, shuttered houses, winding lanes and artisan markets. All honey sands and glittering waters, it's no wonder that Antibes was adored by the likes of Picasso and F Scott Fitzgerald (the latter wrote *Tender is the Night* here). Here, the Plage du Ponteil is a favourite with locals, with its dramatic views of the Alps and the town's ramparts. The glamorous setting that is Pampelonne in Saint Tropez brings a different dimension entirely. White sands and superyachts attract an oh-so-chic crowd.



From above: Cours Saleya outdoor market in Nice's old town; the Côte d'Azur in all its shimmering glory; the Casino de Monte-Carlo, Monaco

WILD WANDERINGS: NATURE BEYOND THE COAST

The Côte d'Azur may be best known for its cerulean waters, but explore inland and you'll also come across natural wonders of the verdant kind. The Mercantour National Park is less than an hour's drive from Nice and is bursting with an abundance of flora, fauna and wildlife. Hiking trails take you past pristine landscapes and age-old mountain villages. Hire a professional guide so you can access the remarkable Vallée des Merveilles (Valley of Wonders), home to the largest number of open-air Bronze Age rock carvings in Europe. Meanwhile, the Jardin Exotique d'Èze is another source of joy for nature lovers. The stunning hanging gardens are found in the ruins of a mediaeval fortress, 429m above the Mediterranean Sea. As you stroll next to an abundance of flowering cacti and towering succulents, you'll gaze over one of the most spectacular views of the French Riviera.

SAVOUR EVERY SECOND: CULINARY HIGHS

From fresh, crusty bread to delicious, melt-in-your-mouth cheeses, the gourmet traditions of this region are satisfyingly plentiful. 'Cuisine Nissarde' includes, naturally, salad Niçoise. Then there are courgette blossom *beignets*, *pissaladière* – topped with caramelised onions, anchovies and olives – and Socca flatbread made from chickpea flour. Dating from 1933, Chez Pipo in Nice's Old Town still makes the bread to the original recipe, served up with various tapenades. For a glass of crisp rosé with glorious views of Nice harbour, head to Le Plongeoir. This unique Belle Époque bar sits on a rocky outcrop over the sea.

MARVELLOUS MEANDERINGS: VILLAGE PIT STOPS

Surrounded by vineyards and with views over the Côte d'Azur, it's no wonder the lofty mediaeval village of Saint-Paul de Vence has long attracted artists and musicians. Winding cobblestone lanes, a rich collection of art galleries and a buzzy café culture give this village picture-postcard status. With its ancient castle and old stone houses, the hilltop outpost of Gourdon, meanwhile, is often voted one of the most beautiful villages in France. It is found perched 700m above sea level and offers heart-stopping views of the coast from Nice to Esterel. Taking you back in time is the beguiling village of Eze, dating back to the Middle Ages. From its mountain position, the whole of the shoreline is laid out before you.

PICTURE THIS: AN ART LOVER'S PLAYGROUND

Due to its long artistic heritage, the Côte d'Azur is bursting with gems for art lovers. Must-sees include the stained-glass windows in Chapelle du Rosaire in Vence, created by the artist Henri Matisse, and the Picasso Museum in Antibes – carved out of a 14th-century castle. Visitors can take in 245 works by Pablo Picasso, as well as other artists from the Modernist period. Architectural buffs, meanwhile, should check out Latitude 43, a former hotel (and now luxury apartments) in Saint Tropez. A jewel of Modernist architecture, it was designed by Georges-Henri Pingusson and completed in 1932.

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