

Best of Provence & Côte d'Azur

Top 20 things to see & do

1 Juan-les-Pins Jazz Festival

Jazz à Juan is an awesome event and one of the best music festivals in France. The open-air stage – backed by palm trees and the moonlit Mediterranean – has welcomed some of history's all-time finest jazz musicians, from Dizzy Gillespie to BB King. The star-studded 2009 programme hosted Joss Stone, Jamie Callum, Jeff Beck and MC Solaar. Page 48.

2 The Camargue

This 1000 sq km triangle of shallow lakes, salt marshes and reed beds supports an exotic array of indigenous wildlife, including the white Camargue horse and pink flamingos. Try riding, kayaking or mountain biking through the vast National Park. Page 260.

3 Provence's coastal path

A *maquis*-scented coastal path runs almost continuously from the Camargue to the Italian border. Known locally as the *sentier des douaniers* (or custom officers' trail), it passes deserted beaches, fishing villages, dive sites and picnic spots, as well as some of Europe's most over-the-top villas. Best of all, it's completely free. Page 106.



2 Flamingos at the Camargue's Parc Ornithologique de Pont de Gau.



3 Trail between St-Paul and Vence.



4 Driving the Monaco Formula One circuit.

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Trace the Grand Prix circuit on YouTube or grab a map from the tourist office. By car, scooter or on foot the route takes in statues of F1's greats and legions of million-Euro cars. Can you beat Felipe Massa's 75-second fastest lap? Page 125.

5 Gorges du Verdon & Lac de Ste-Croix

Little will prepare you for the vertiginous embrace of the Gorges du Verdon. Europe's largest canyon, it's now a haven for hikers, rock-climbers and bungee-jumpers, who dive 180 m off the Pont d'Artuby, one of the highest falls in the world. The Verdon seeps into Lac de Ste-Croix, a serene emerald green lake, perfect for kayaking, trekking around and birdwatching. Page 162.

6 Dining in Marseille

Home to the world-famous *bouillabaisse* fish stew, Marseille's ethnic mix lets you eat your way around the world any evening: try Japanese, Moroccan, Italian, Vietnamese or Portuguese. Page 204.

7 St-Tropez's Musée l'Annonciade

A perfect palette of Provence's modern art scene. The changing nature of European painting from realistic representation to colour-filled excess is caught on canvas by the likes of Matisse, Marquet and Signac. Their paintings of lavender fields, fishing villages and passing sailboats document dreamy scenes from across the region. Page 132.



5 Lac de Ste Croix.

8 Nice's Musée Masséna

This neoclassical seaside mansion is the perfect setting for a local history lesson. The Musée Masséna highlights the artists, heiresses and celebrities that made the Riviera great, by way of paintings, period jewellery and photos from the belle époque. Barring Paris, Nice has more museums than any of other city in France. Most of them, like this one, are completely free. Page 78.

9 Provence's trains

Clean, efficient and comprehensive, Provence's rail system is world-class. Three lines in particular – the Train des Pignes, the Roya Valley and the Cannes-Italy coastal train – are achingly beautiful. And that's before you've even stepped off the train. Pages 165, 167 and 125.

10 Ski slopes

Daily ski buses hit Auron, Isola 2000 and Valberg each winter morning. The price? From Nice, just €1 each way. Resorts boast hundreds of kilometres of runs, with an emphasis on beginners and snowboarders. Book a moderate ski-in ski-out hotel for a night, or bus it back to the coast for dinner. Page 168.

About the region

Eating & drinking

Provençal cuisine

In striking contrast to the French stereotype, Provence and the Côte d'Azur is not a traditional land of plenty. Instead, the region's cuisine is a mix of peasant dishes and Italian influences. Recipes were developed to make the most of harvest gluts, and in times of little to make prized ingredients go the distance. Meats are often used to enhance a dish, rather than taking centre stage, and olive oil, not butter, features in pretty much everything.

Fruit and vegetables are really the local stars, and always have been. Unlike other parts of the world, locals here never lost touch with their traditions. Sure, heirloom vegetables are making a comeback, but you can bet that granny (at her market stall stocking just three seasonal items) never stopped growing them.

Swiss chard (*blettes*) is used in everything from savoury bakes to sweet *tourte*. Courgettes, aubergines and peppers are bathed in a garlic tomato sauce in *ratatouille*. Crunchy raw artichokes, peppers, and even asparagus and broad beans headline in *salade niçoise*. A particularly snacky city, Nice residents favour the same salad in its sandwich version, *pan bagnat*, as well as on-the-go favourites, savoury chick pea *socca* and onion-topped *pissaladière*.

Baguettes are a French staple, but the carb of choice varies in Provence. Italian-esque pasta

dishes corner the southeast, while in the Camargue locally grown rice is a favourite. Sprinkled with *fleur de sel* from the nearby salt beds, of course.

Mer et Terre

Suspended between the mountains and the sea, Provence's traditional dishes encompass fruits of both the land and the sea, as well as more carnivorous offerings.

Surprisingly for this sea-flanked region, not only can fish be a pricey choice, but what you're eating is not always Riviera-sourced: much of the coast has been overfished, particularly in the southeast. *Soupe de poissons* makes the most of the Mediterranean's indigenous rockfish, while *bourride* and Marseille's famous *bouillabaisse* are more high-end options. Slow-cooked or fried *soupions* are a down-to-earth dish, and the lucky will sample springtime *poutine*, tiny fish at their tastiest when served raw, dressed with olive oil and lemon.

If you're self-catering, source your own local *rouget*, *rascasse* and *dorade* at Marseille's morning market (see page 187) in the Vieux Port or Cagnes-sur-Mer's daily *Marché aux Poissons*. You'll often find stalls selling fish and other seafood, particularly urchins, along the quay in every town on the coast.

From the Alpine hills inland, particularly around Sisteron, comes Haute-Provence's famous lamb. Traditionally, every part of the animal was used,



“

Provence is a country to which I am always returning, next week, next year, any day now, as soon as I can get on a train.

”

Elizabeth David

Cheeses from the French Alps, Arles street market.

Nice

Nice is justly described as the Queen of the Riviera. The city is blessed with the 4-km-long promenade des Anglais, which runs along the sea. Although it boasts a medieval history and a colourful period of Italian reign, Nice became the tourism capital of the Côte d'Azur at the turn of the 20th century, when Europe's nobility followed Queen Victoria on her long winter vacations in the upmarket suburb of Cimiez. Artists including Matisse and Chagall soon succeeded on to this exclusive stage. Nowadays holidaymakers from the world over pour on to trains, planes and ferries to arrive in the French Riviera's most vibrant gateway.

Nice Old Town.



Essentials

📍 Getting around Walking is a cinch. The promenade des Anglais, place Masséna, the Old Town and many of the shopping streets are pedestrianized. The no 15 bus to Cimiez leaves from rue Sasha Guity, by Galeries Lafayette (see page 123). Bus tickets can be bought from electronic kiosks at each stop for €1 per journey. Taxis can be ordered via a multi-lingual hotline (T04 93 13 78 78) or picked up at ranks outside the Grand Hotel Aston, Le Méridien, place d'Île de Beauté in Nice Port, or at other locations throughout the city.

🚆 Train station Nice-Ville train station, 3 avenue Thiers, sncf.fr. Recommended for journeys west to Antibes and Cannes. Linked with the bus station by Nice's single tram line (tickets €1 from electronic kiosk).

🚌 Bus station Gare Routière, 5 boulevard Jean Jaurès, T04 93 85 61 81. For the **Train des Pignes** (see page 165) into the mountains, the privately run **Chemins de Fer de Provence** (4 rue Alfred Binet, T04 97 03 80 80, trainprovence.com) is a 10-minute walk north of Nice-Ville station.

🏧 ATMs Found on most streets in the newer part of town. Old Town locations include place Rossetti, boulevard Jean Jaurès and the Opera house.

🏥 Hospital Hôpital St Roch, 5 rue Pierre Dévoluy, T04 92 03 33 33, chu-nice.fr.

🏪 Pharmacy Pharmacie de Paris, 60 avenue Jean Médecin, T04 93 85 12 81.

📮 Post office 23 avenue Thiers (train station), 2 rue Louis Gassin (Old Town), 6 quai Papacino (Port).

🗺 Tourist information office 5 promenade des Anglais, daily June-September 0900-2000, October-May 0900-1800; 3 avenue Thiers, June-September Monday-Saturday 0800-2000, Sunday 0900-1900, October-May Monday-Saturday 0800-1900, Sunday 1000-1700; both T08 92 70 74 07, nicetourisme.com.

Nice Vieille Ville

The pastel hues and lavender-blue shutters that colour the Old Town's zigzag streets are a heady reminder of Nice's Italian connections. Those making a *passaggiata* (leisurely stroll) along these narrow lanes may notice other influences from across the border, like local dialect *Nissart*, a Ligurian tongue, shouted from window to window as you wander beneath.

Decades ago guidebooks warned against visiting this area after dark, it being generally perceived as a warren of prostitutes, drug dealers and vice. These seedy elements have slowly been replaced by one-off boutiques and scores of galleries. The best of these art studios line **rue Droite**, which bisects the old city from north to south. Also along this pretty street is the **Palais Lascaris** (15 rue Droite, Wed-Mon 1000-1800, free), one of a dozen palatial dwellings that once belonged to local nobles, and the only one open to the public. Inside the restored mansion are frescoes, statuary and 17th century objets d'art.

Marking the border between the Old Town and the promenade des Anglais is the venerable **cours Saleya**. This avenue of ostentatious mansions starts with the gold façade of Matisse's former home at the eastern end. Heading west to the flower market (Tue-Sun 0730-1800) shoppers pass through a line of fruit and vegetable stalls, all covered with stripy awnings (Tue-Sun 0800-1300). At lunch these picture-perfect market pitches give way to the *al fresco* tables of the surrounding restaurants, which in turn become aperitif spots in the evening, and dining terraces at night. This entire street is cleaned with seawater at dawn before the shop-eat-drink-stroll cycle revolves once again.

Promenade des Anglais & beach

The **promenade des Anglais** is the wide esplanade that runs along the entire length of Nice's pebbly beach. The view from the eastern end, over the 4 km of beaches, hotels, restaurants and mountains on the horizon, formed the backdrop for paintings



Port Cros, Iles d'Hyères.

Introduction

This most beguiling and varied area of Provence started from humble beginnings. The saltpans between La Capte's 4-km-long beaches were the primary source of income for Hyères' residents, while those living on Porquerolles Island and the Massif des Maures hill stations scratched a living from piracy and herding respectively, both of which likely vie for rank of the world's second oldest profession.

Aristocratic consumptives provided a wealthy fillip in the mid-1800s, but the economy of this stunningly beautiful region found itself best suited to the pursuit of pleasure. In the decades following painter Paul Signac's 'discovery' of the quaint charms of St-Tropez in 1892, other artists and celebrities glamorised the region with fiery canvases and architectural follies.

By and large, the area's magnificent beaches (Le Lavandou alone boasts 12) went untouched until they were invaded by US troops in 1944. Post-war, it was the French, not foreigners, who colonised the resorts of Ste-Maxime, Giens and Théoule, with quaintness unseen elsewhere in Provence. But as the luxury of leisure grew – and with it, the sexy decadence of St-Tropez and gastro-greatness of Bormes-les-Mimosas – so did the demand for escape. The unpretentious headed to the romantic hill villages of Gassin or Ramatuelle, or joined the island communities on Port-Cros and Levant: the former a nature reserve, the latter a reserve for naturists. The lonely D41 and N98 wind through the unruly Massif des Maures, while the Corniche de l'Estérel corkscrews through cliffs too precipitous to build on. And if the mountain trails and rigours of the GR9 don't tempt, perhaps the coastal paths around St-Tropez's peninsula and St-Raphaël will.

What to see in...

...one day

In St-Tropez, the canvases of the Musée l'Annonciade and the promenades of place des Lices and the quay best evoke the fishing-village-to-hedonist-hotspot story. An afternoon in nearby Ramatuelle or Gassin, or on a nearby white-sand beach, offers sweet respite. A day snorkelling on the Iles d'Hyères, or hill town hopping in the Massif des Maures, is equally appealing.



...a weekend or more

The dozen beaches of Le Lavandou warrant exploration, be it by car, scooter, kayak or speedboat. The region's vineyards drip down to the sea further east and west, while the hilltop redoubts of Grimaud and La Garde-Freinet could be explored in a full day.

Marseille & the Calanques

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Backstreets of Cassis Old Town.