

AZURE PARADISE

A personal guide to the most beautiful spots on the Côte d'Azur

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As the plane descended toward the airport at Nice, my eyes were dazzled by the brilliant turquoise-coloured waters of the Mediterranean Sea, in which luxury yachts of various sizes could be seen. That alone was enough to induce a calm sense of relaxation through my body, while giving rise to thoughts about enjoying life to the fullest. The French Riviera is like a delectable dessert, with a thick dose of creamy glamour on the surface (which might perhaps seem too sweet in large amounts) covering gentle and unforgettable flavours underneath.



Champagne on tender nights

What is the best thing to do once you have landed at Nice Côte d'Azur International Airport? After you have retrieved your luggage, take a look around. Not far from the baggage carousels is a shop with a surprisingly wide choice of champagne. It would be a sin not to enjoy this wonderful drink in the country of its origin, so treat yourself to a chilled bottle and pour

yourself a glass later as you watch the sunset over the sea. Celebrate your arrival to a region that has inspired countless artists, writers and other luminaries. Raise one glass to the late artist Pablo Picasso and another to writer F. Scott Fitzgerald, both of whom paid tribute to life in the Riviera, each in his own way.

Champagne, sunglasses and gladiator sandals are just some of the essentials for a summer

holiday in southern France. What else? A good car for freedom of movement and ideally a convertible so that nothing obstructs your view of the picturesque coast and scenic mountain roads. The car rental companies at the airport in Nice offer a plentiful choice of models (it's worth reserving a car beforehand through rentalcars.com) and practically everyone should be able to find the right car for their needs.

Those with thicker wallets might opt for an *Aston Martin*, while the latest generation of electrically powered cars is sure to please the environmentally conscious. If you arrive at the height of the summer heat, then it is worth taking a car with some vital upgrades such as air conditioning, which actually don't cost that much more. However, nothing beats driving around in a convertible, with the wind flowing freely in your hair and the sun gently warming your shoulders.

Where should you make your first stop? Most definitely at the stylish *Toile Blanche* hotel (826, chemin de la Pouchounière, Saint-Paul de Vence, toileblanche.com), with which you will immediately fall in love. Only a 15-minute drive northwest of the airport, the hotel is like a small corner of paradise at the edge of the medieval town of Saint-Paul de Vence. The hotel is owned by the Leroy Family, which is passionate about contemporary art and this is reflected in the

hotel's interior details. *Toile Blanche* is an oasis of peace and tranquillity where time seems to slow down considerably. Here, it's hard to believe that the crowded and busy city of Nice is such a short drive away.

This is a place where birds chirp away undisturbed as you enjoy a breathtaking view of the hills and of the villages nestled onto their summits. It is worth spending a quiet day sunbathing by the pool and breathing in the intoxicating fragrance of blooming rose bushes, then moving on to the terrace during

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the evening, where the proprietors – three charming brothers – will spoil you with culinary masterpieces. Enjoy your meal with a cool glass of rosé wine and engage in friendly conversation until the late night hours, as the cicadas and grasshoppers sing their mating tunes on a warm summer evening. "Tender is the night," wrote Fitzgerald, and the significance of these words suddenly becomes clear at this beautiful spot.



You will awake in the morning to the sound of roosters crowing, the sight of brilliant sunshine and the smell of fragrant coffee wafting up from the kitchen. The breakfast served at the *Toile Blanche* is close to divine, with fresh warm bread from the nearby bakery, homemade apricot marmalade, country eggs from a neighbouring farm, fresh fruit and great-tasting coffee. Once again, the guests are pampered by the same family trio. The brothers' philosophy is to be present and to do everything on their own, from greeting the guests on their arrival to cooking up their meals. One feels as if one is staying with old friends at a cozy home where one would be glad to spend the entire summer. The *Toile Blanche* is also an ideal base for exploring the seaside towns and cities of the Riviera during the first part of the day, before returning to enjoy a warm and lazy afternoon of rest and relaxation.



Coastal jewels

The word "France" is synonymous with "outstanding cuisine" and one should not miss the opportunity to savour an exceptional lunch at the two-Michelin-starred *Mirazur* restaurant (30 avenue Aristide Briand, Menton, mirazur.fr), which is headed by Argentinean chef Mauro Colagreco. Head eastward along the coast to Menton, a charming city that lies only 1 km from the Italian border. The trip from the hotel along the high-speed *autoroute* doesn't take more than 40 minutes. At Menton, the parasols dotting the beach facing the turquoise waters make for a postcard-perfect picture.

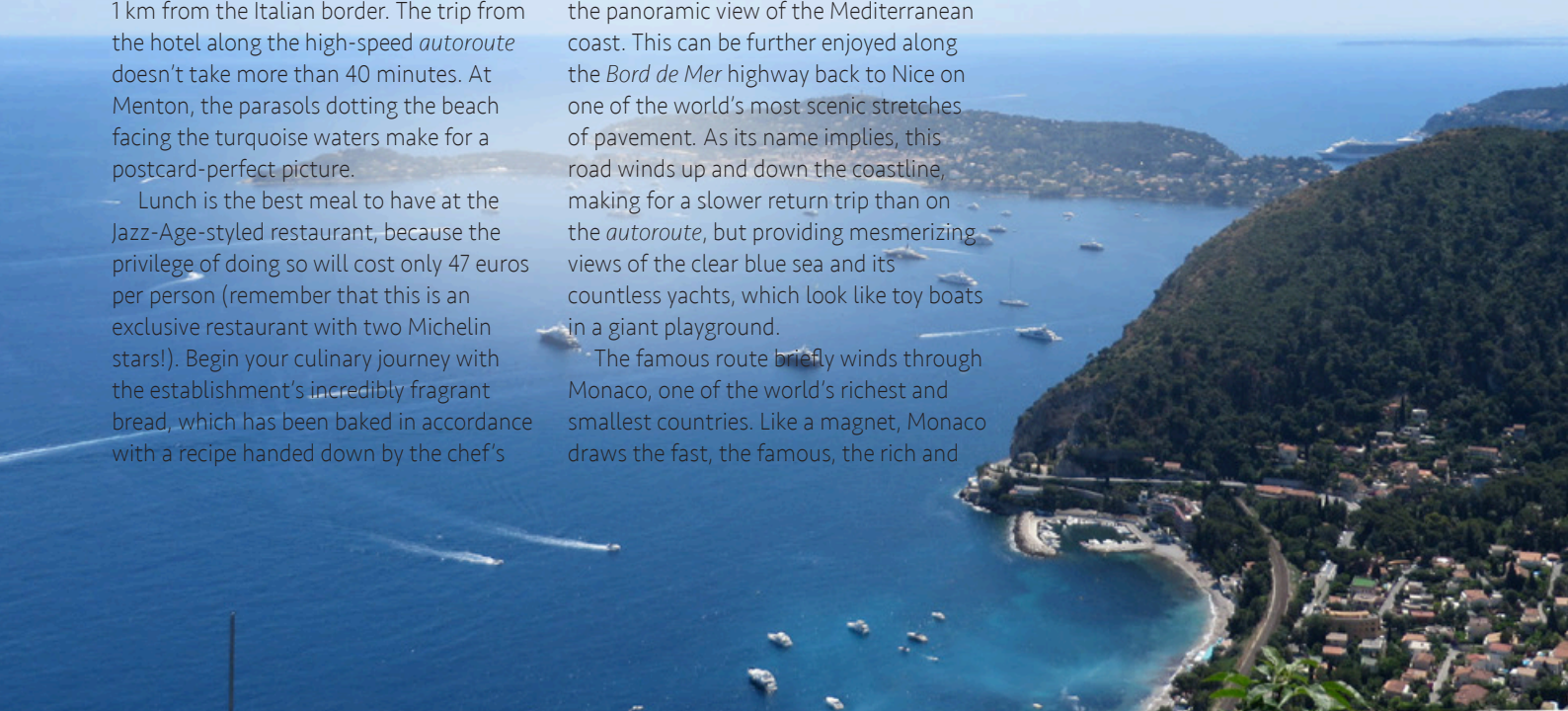
— Lunch is the best meal to have at the Jazz-Age-styled restaurant, because the privilege of doing so will cost only 47 euros per person (remember that this is an exclusive restaurant with two Michelin stars!). Begin your culinary journey with the establishment's incredibly fragrant bread, which has been baked in accordance with a recipe handed down by the chef's

Italian grandmother. Dip a piece into some olive oil and you will understand why this bread has obtained near legendary status throughout the region. Follow that with seasonal products that the chef has grown in his own garden, fresh seafood caught earlier that morning, and meat from the best local butchers.

A full stomach makes for a happy heart, but possibly the best "dessert" of all is the panoramic view of the Mediterranean coast. This can be further enjoyed along the *Bord de Mer* highway back to Nice on one of the world's most scenic stretches of pavement. As its name implies, this road winds up and down the coastline, making for a slower return trip than on the *autoroute*, but providing mesmerizing views of the clear blue sea and its countless yachts, which look like toy boats in a giant playground.

The famous route briefly winds through Monaco, one of the world's richest and smallest countries. Like a magnet, Monaco draws the fast, the famous, the rich and

those who like to take risks. Millions of euros continue to be won and lost at the legendary casino in Monte Carlo, and once a year, the central streets of the city are converted into a *Formula 1* car race course. Adrenaline, speed, luxury, flashiness and glitz are the words that best describe this place. Some visitors are drawn by the tiny nation's extravagant lifestyle, while others choose to quickly





leave this epicentre of glamour after satisfying their curiosity with a brief visit.

Before returning to France, it is worth walking along the small and narrow Ruelle Sainte-Barbe, which leads downward along the seaside promontory from the crowded Place du Palais by the 13th-century prince's palace. Take a stroll along this street in surprising silence and enjoy the magnificent vista of the water craft moored at the Port de Fontvieille. Then head a short distance southwest to the port at Cap d'Ail in France and sip on an apéritif at *A'Trego* (Port de Plaisance, restaurantatrego.com), a beachside club and restaurant that is bathed by the sea on two sides, about 200 metres from the border with Monaco. The pleasant interior by French designer Philippe Starck makes one feel like one is on the deck of a luxury cruise ship rather than a restaurant – a great spot for a glass of champagne or late afternoon sunbathing.

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Continue your coastal journey westward to the amphitheatre-like Villefranche-sur-Mer at the edge of a deep blue bay. Aside from having a great beach, the town also harbours historic medieval buildings and narrow cobblestone streets, as well as miniature courtyards with cats taking midday siestas. It's worth taking a leisurely walk up the streets to a higher level and marvelling at the view of the natural harbour below. In the Old Town, the medieval rue Obscure (Dark Street) is entirely covered by vaulted arcades. At the end of the Second World War, this street sheltered the people of Villefranche from a German artillery bombardment and saved

many lives. Stepping back out into the sunshine at the end of the 130-metre-long passageway and recalling this dramatic event, one is happy to breathe in the refreshing seaside air and feels grateful for the peace and beauty of the surroundings.

The serpentine road to the medieval village of Èze draws one away from existential reflections on the past. Perched on a narrow rocky peak, the village offers a stunning view of the Mediterranean Sea. The best time to visit is in the late afternoon, when the narrow streets are quieter and when one can easily enter a meditative state observing the marvellous painting created by Nature herself at various vantage points.

Make sure to drive into Saint-Jean-Cap-Ferrat to see the enchanting gardens of the *Villa Ephrussi de Rothschild* (or *Villa Île de France*). Looking like they could have come straight out of the tales of the *One Thousand and One Nights*, the grounds are home to plants that have been thematically arranged to represent various parts of the world, including Spain and Japan. Baroness Béatrice Ephrussi de Rothschild created the impressive gardens during the early 20th century with mathematical precision. To get a better grasp of the proportions, the baroness asked some of her servants to wear pyramids of green cardboard and act as cypress trees, or to move around with other props and simulate ponds, pathways and flowerbeds. The soft salmon-coloured tone of the villa's exterior, for its part, harmoniously blends in with the sky and the sea.

Following your excursions among the towns of the Côte d'Azur and your return to the *Toile Blanche*, take a walk to the adjacent village of Saint-Paul de Vence. Although that involves an approximately 20-minute uphill climb, the view of the sun setting over the hilltops to the west is well worth the effort! The narrow streets and medieval buildings will make you feel like you have travelled back in time, while numerous art galleries will remind you of the present, as Saint-Paul de Vence is a well-known platform for various forms of artistic expression, thanks to the presence of the *Fondation Maeght*, one of the most beautiful contemporary art museums in Europe. The museum's collection

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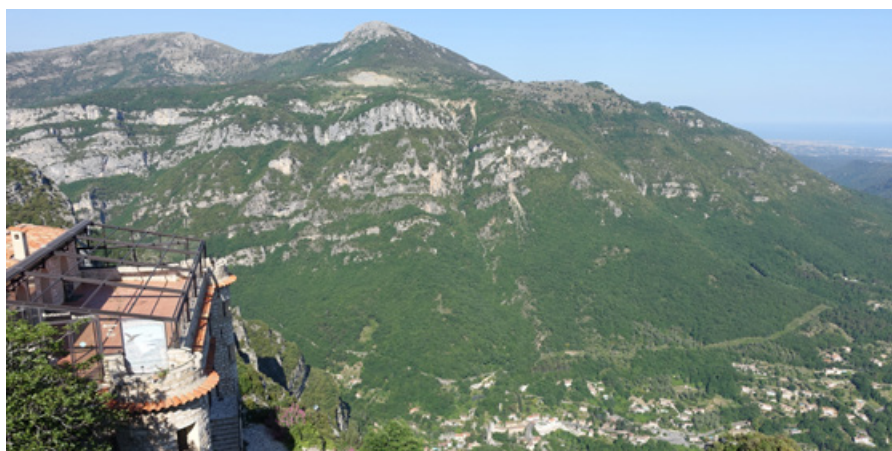
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Cap your evening with an unforgettable Provençal-style meal at the famous *Colombe d'Or* restaurant (place Général de Gaulle, Saint-Paul de Vence), which for decades has been drawing both Cannes film festival stars and those who simply wish to savour an exceptional meal. Regular mortals need not worry, however, as there is no trace of snobbery here. You may come across French actor Vincent

Cassel dining on a leg of lamb at the table next to yours, but you might not even notice, for the restaurant's wonderful atmosphere, delectable food and quiet chatter at the other tables will envelop you like a silk cocoon. After your meal, step into the lobby of the *La Colombe d'Or* hotel in the same building to look at original works by Pablo Picasso and Henri Matisse. At the beginning of their career when they were not as well-known, both artists paid for their lodgings at the hotel with their paintings instead of in cash.



A touch of Provence

If you start to feel that the panoramas can't get any more breathtaking than those that you've already seen, then head to the villages on the nearby mountain summits. The village of Coursegoules, for example, stands at the foot of the Cheiron cliff face and is a mere 20-minute drive north of Saint-Paul de Vence. It goes back to the 13th century and will really let you feel the charm of Provence. Few travellers pass through there and even the local

inhabitants disappear from view at midday. A cat can be heard meowing, pigeons coo nearby, and people's steps echo in a courtyard, but nobody is to be seen and it seems like the entire village has fallen into an afternoon slumber.

The road continues further up along mountain serpentines to Gourdon. Leave your car at the closest spot where you can find a parking space and you will not even be able to imagine the stupendous view that awaits you after a five-minute walk



from the village's central square. It seems as if the whole Côte d'Azur coastline can be seen below, with gigantic cruise ships looking like tiny dots on an infinite carpet of blue. Stretch your legs out onto a bench and soak in the view while cooling your mind with a lavender-flavoured ice cream.

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Take the serpentine back toward the coast to Tourrettes-sur-Loup, where one should stop not just to walk through the medieval streets, but also to savour some of the best crêpes in the region at the tiny *Crêperie Piccolo Mondo*. The owner doesn't speak English, which somehow makes the place seem all the more charming. Sit down at one of the three outside tables,

order either sweet or salty crêpes along with a glass of apple cider and enjoy!

On another day, I recommend driving in the opposite direction from the *Toile Blanche* to the art and gastronomy mecca of Mougins. Perching atop a 300-metre-high mountain, the town offers a scenic view of nearby Grasse and its surroundings. Even in the summer, the high peaks in the distance remain snow-capped. Mougins is a veritable platform for the arts, with sculptures and installations set up in many places for added inspiration, while numerous small restaurants favoured by gourmets are hidden among the olive and cypress trees.

One restaurant not to miss is the Michelin-starred *La Place de Mougins* (41 place du Commandant Lamy, laplacedemougins.fr), which is run by culinary star Denis Fétisson. Make sure to try the risotto with octopus ink and the chef's own *Bellini* cocktail, which he is likely to mix for you in person. Fétisson can often be found joking with his guests at the



small restaurant tables. Did I mention that the lunchtime special costs only 27 euros per person (look for *Le midi de la place* in the menu)? With its surprising mix of art and gastronomy, Mougins lures one in so subtly that a couple of hours after arriving, one finds that one is still at the same place where one started off and that one doesn't really feel like leaving.

A trip along the Côte d'Azur should be enjoyed slowly, like a good wine. You should not make a detailed plan of what to visit in Southern France, with a long list of boxes to check off. It's sufficient to see three or four places a day, even though the distances covered are not very large. No need to rush anywhere! You might wake up one morning and not feel like doing anything else except for lying on the sandy beach at Juan-les-Pins next to Antibes, or lounging around by the pool at the *Toile Blanche*. Don't be afraid to do so, and *carpe diem* (seize the day), as the sunniest part in southern France is worth returning to again and again. **BO**