



Keen to explore the French Riviera without maxing out her credit card, **Minty Clinch** found the Côte d'Azur surprisingly affordable

A century ago, simple pleasure was top of everyone's wish list. Europeans had endured World War I carnage followed by Spanish flu.

Greatly daring Americans were crossing the Atlantic to test the boundaries of possibility in an older world. Accustomed to hot summers back home, they loved the French Riviera,

where unmarked trails snaked through pines to beaches bookended by rocky headlands. Life, they readily discovered, was fun, glam and cheap. They might not recognise their holiday playground nowadays, but its essence is still there. Even around Saint-Tropez, the ordinary delights of wine, hiking, cycling and swimming won't break the bank.

In Victorian winters, Englishmen abandoned mansions with rudimentary heating for houses on the 7km Promenade des Anglais along the Nice seafront. Her Majesty liked it too: naturally, her hotel of choice was the Excelsior Regina Palace. Come the Roaring Twenties, high season switched to summer, with artists and writers in beach pyjamas

PHOTOS: NAPA24 / GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO, BARETA



ripping up the Corniche in open-topped cars.

About the same time, F. Scott Fitzgerald was looking out of the window as he wrote the first paragraph of *Tender is the Night*. 'On the pleasant shore of the French Riviera, about half way between Marseilles and the Italian border, stands a large, proud, rose-coloured hotel. Deferential palms cool its flushed facade and before it stretches a short dazzling beach. Lately it has become a summer resort of notable and fashionable people'. With a sigh, he blotted the ink and headed out to meet like-minded tourists for midday cocktails.

His fictional Americans, Dick and Nicole Diver, settled in as readily as he and his crazed wife, Zelda, their mirror images in real life. For both couples, paradise was short-lived, their parallel declines into poverty and betrayal fuelled by idleness and booze. Meanwhile they adopted 'bright-tan prayer rug beaches', swam vigorously and lunched heartily. Even before his book was published in 1934, Fitzgerald noted bungalows heralding the arrival of less exclusive travellers. Excellent news, because those who choose to join them nearly a century later will still find many of the things they loved.

Left:

Waterfront and harbour view of Saint-Tropez

COCKTAIL HOUR

So it came to pass that I headed along the Corniche in late summer to roost in one of a dozen smart villas in Les Restanques du Carré Beauchêne, a gated community in Sainte-Maxime. Roaming through the spacious party area to a cocktail terrace overlooking the private pool, I felt instantly at home. Millionaire's accommodation with a worker's price tag. Staying here costs from £337 per person for a week in August in a villa sleeping eight. In the same month, a hotel room in a three star hotel such as Le Chardon Bleu or Royal Bon Repos is £150 a night.

After slipping into something skimpy, our gang headed downtown to stroll along the promenade to the buzzy port. First up a *pastis*, invariably the most affordable *apéro* all over the country. It is an acquired taste, but at £2.50 a go, it's worth overcoming any first timer's aversion. Adding water to turn the yellow liquid into milky clouds releases dreams of Provence.

The Bay of Saint-Tropez is a fat tongue of sea, with the Port Grimaud complex at the landward end. On its northern shore, Sainte-Maxime looks enviously at Saint-Tropez, brazenly hogging international bragging rites across the water. Sainte-Maxime too has an old town with winding streets, linked beaches stretching both ways – the Plage de la Nartelle is the best known – and a busy harbour, but the style is more chilled.

In the interests of affordable local fare, look beyond the picturesque commercialism of the waterfront. As all French golfers expect a good lunch at a bargain price, try the Saint-Andrews at the Sainte-Maxime club; the views over the Massifs des Maures and Esterel are outstanding and the lead-in price for *table d'hôte* is £13.

Below:

The luxury resort of Villefranche-sur-Mer on the Côte d'Azur



At La Vague d'Or, the three Michelin star domain of chef Arnaud Donckele, in the Cheval Blanc hotel in Saint-Tropez, diners pay an average of £155.

Back at the ranch, the after party was quick to start and slow to finish. Playlists and wine segued into wild dancing as time flashed by. A great night in at minimum cost.

VENICE OF THE RIVIERA

Scott Fitzgerald would envy such free spirits, but he might have missed our 9am bus.

That journey ended in a boat ride round Port Grimaud, a web of canals created out of marshes reclaimed from the estuary of the River Giscle in the 1960s.

When bad eyesight prevented him joining the navy, Alsatian architect Francois Spoerry switched careers to create 'the Venice of the Riviera', its waterfronts lined with faux Provençal fishermen's cottages.

The properties are served by access roads, but the USP is that each has its own mooring.

Most are two or three storeys with gardens and decorative ironwork, painted in gelati colours: pistachio, vanilla, chocolate and strawberry.

In 1966, Brigitte Bardot paid peanuts for hers, a yellow one on the beach near the market place, the focus of a community that includes shops and a cinema. The glowing stained glass by Victor



Above: Dining al fresco off the beaten track is a must

Vasarely in Église Saint-François d'Assise is worth the tiny detour.

When the first 1,000 sold out, the developers triggered phases B and C over 25 years. Today there are 3,000 houses, the simplest valued at €1m plus.

Grimaud itself, four largely vertical kilometres inland, could hardly be a greater contrast. The fortified village predates the port by over a 1,000 years. It's perched on a hill topped by a castle, partly ruined and a bit of a slog, but a splendid viewpoint. In 983, Gibelin de Grimaldi received the land as a reward for helping William the Liberator, Comte de Provence, expel the Saracens from Fraxinet, as the settlement was then called.

Cycling through flat coastal



Below: Canons on the Citadel at Saint-Tropez

towns to less populated beaches is a smart move; Villefranche-sur-Mer is a standout in this respect. Pedalling imperiously along the Croisette in Cannes gives you a sense of ownership over the Carlton, the Martinez and the Majestic, period hotels favoured by stars from film and television. Unless you have the lung power of Chris Froome or Bradley Wiggins, heading up into the hinterland requires more sophisticated equipment. E-biking is now so routine that engineers have moved on from contemporary hardware to classic designs.

There's something for those seeking a vintage vibe too. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the mind behind the MEJS Motorman *motocycllette* belongs to a 65-year-





old Dutchman with vintage dreams. Low handlebars, a curvaceous frame and a leather saddle evoke racing motor bikes from the 1930s. JP, of La Guepe Mobile, the brand distributors in Sainte-Maxime and Saint-Tropez, took us through the machine's paces before leading us out onto the mountainside. The top speed is 30mph, the stability is unshakeable and disc brakes curb any impulse to lose control. We swooped the snaking roads through pine trees to the hill top village of Ramatuelle, pausing frequently for selfies.

If there's better 'see and be seen' transport in Saint-Tropez, it's the open-topped Méhari. In 1968, Citroën produced an off-road compact SUV, naming it for a speedy dromedary camel.

Above:
Port Grimaud
is known as the
Little Venice



Right:
Visiting
Le Moulin
de Paillass,
Ramatuelle,
on retro
motocyclettes

Production stopped in 1988, but with little to go wrong and replacement parts readily available, the Méhari maximised its 50th birthday celebrations in 2018.

Our bright white electric model was not the most comfortable but we revelled in the stares it generated. At least there were no spokes in which to trap our pashminas!

SUMMER PLEASURES

Whenever in need, a wine tasting offers a free drink. The Côte d'Azur specialises in quaffables and Provençal rosé is always a benchmark for summer pleasures. Domaine Tropez in Gassin set up shop in 1996. As one American visitor put it, 'folks were friendly and the pours were generous'. We checked his verdict thoroughly *en plein air*: he was right.

In the 1920s Scott Fitzgerald could cycle, ride a motorbike and drive a cabriolet, but he'd be impressed by water sports advances a century later.

Nowadays waterskiers compete with jetbikers and windsurfers with wakeboarders. The humdrum approach to Saint-Tropez is a 20-minute



ferry ride across the bay, a brief adjustment to glitz city. The warnings are there en route, a magnificent four mast yacht in full sail preparing for the Tall Ships race, a harbour full of motorised sea-going palaces painted silver and gold, an

Above:
Les Restanques
du Carré
Beauchêne

installation of bronzed cellos on the harbour front.

I was surprised at how small Saint-Tropez is. With less than 6,000 residents, compared to Sainte-Maxime's 14,000, it is spectacularly ill-equipped to welcome over 100,000 visitors a year. As they disembark, they cram into a band of narrow artisan lanes lined with shops before emerging onto Place des Lices. Turn left for the Citadel, built on the rocky headland in 1602. The entry fee is a bargain £4.50 and you may even have the magnificent views to yourself. Back in the real world on the other side of the bay, our last after party was picking up speed. We'd ticked off Saint-Tropez, but the night had so much more to give... ♡

Francofile

Live like royalty on the Côte d'Azur without the price tag

GETTING THERE

By rail: Eurostar from London to Marseilles is the perfect gateway to the Côte d'Azur. The service operates on Monday, Friday and Saturday from early May to mid-September, with a Sunday train during July and August. From £51 single, £85 return. eurostar.com

By car: Brittany Ferries overnight sailings from Portsmouth to Caen or Le Havre. brittanyferries.com

By air: The nearest international airports are Nice and Marseille.

WHERE TO STAY

Les Restanques du Carré Beauchêne
summerfrance.co.uk
Summer France runs three gated villa communities in Sainte-Maxime. Seven nights in a three-bedroom villa (sleeping up to eight) from £337.60pp in August. The villas have fully equipped American kitchens, private pools, gardens and parking. There is a bakery delivery service at 8am.

WHERE TO EAT

Le Bistrot de Louis
Tel: (Fr) 4 94 43 88 27
Menus €23-25, menu of the day €11-26.



TOURIST INFORMATION: Tourist Office Sainte-Maxime; Tel: (Fr) 8 26 20 83 83; sainte-maxime.com
Tourist Office Grimaud/Port Grimaud; Tel: (Fr) 4 94 55 43 83; grimaud-provence.com

Café de France

Tel: (Fr) 4 94 43 20 05
Fresh fish, oyster, snails and stuffed mussels. Dish of the day €18, menu €28, à la carte €20-40.

Le Saint-Barth

Tel: (Fr) 4 94 96 22 73
saint-barth-plage.com
A Mediterranean feast on Sainte-Maxime's finest beach. Eat on a sun lounger under an umbrella (€25) or beside the swimming pool (€30).

WHAT TO DO

La Guepe Mobile

Tel: (Fr) 6 25 94 45 61
laguepemobile.com
Riding a MEIJS
Motorman in a group for an hour, €30.

