



SAINTE MAXIME, FRANCE

For most people, St Tropez conjures up images of glitz, glamour and celebrity – and rightly so. However, the town and its surrounding area have a great deal more to offer than just these things. This comes in the form of the beautiful little town of Sainte Maxime, with its plethora of stunning coastal views, beautiful architecture and delicious gastronomy, as well as Port Grimaud, dubbed 'the Venice of the French Riviera', and its hilltop counterpart, Grimaud Village; both of which offer beautiful views, quintessentially French markets and fascinating history. Add to this exquisite food and wine around every corner, and you've got the perfect setting for a trip spent basking in the sights, tastes and sounds of the Cote d'Azur.

Our home for the trip was Les Restanques du Carré Beauchêne, villas owned by the wonderful [Summer France](#), overlooking the bay and the mountainous surrounding area. It's ideally located too, only an hour from Nice Airport. The villas themselves are beautifully decorated, with a private garden and a fully equipped kitchen – perfect for taking advantage of fresh produce from Sainte Maxime's covered and outdoor markets! Then it was time for a short drive into Sainte Maxime for a visit of the town, taking in the beautiful art deco buildings (including the stunning Casino), which are dotted along the seafront. The weather was glorious – the town gets a whopping 300 days of sun per year!

This evening sun was perfect for a stroll around the town, taking in the many vintage shops (a vintage fair was due to take place shortly after our visit), and the covered passages, typical of the Provence area. We also passed the covered market, its outdoor counterpart, and the town hall, which sits in pride of place above the town, overlooking the bay. If I were ever to go into politics, I think I'd like to be Mayor of Sainte-Maxime.

Thursday morning started as every day in France should, with freshly baked bread and pastries from La Tarte Tropicaine. The perfect fuel for a day exploring Port Grimaud and Grimaud Village – the former by boat and the latter by foot. Port Grimaud is a fascinating little place, and the comparisons with Venice make perfect sense as soon as you see it. A boat tour through the canals is the perfect way to discover it, followed by a walk around the market and a closer look at Brigitte Bardot's old beachside house.

Although they're both part of Grimaud, Grimaud Village is set much higher up, so you get to enjoy the coast from a very different vantage point. Much like Sainte Maxime, the village is packed full of beautiful little alleyways and streets, and many of the corners are bedecked with vibrant floral displays. Lunch in Grimaud was at the Café de France, where the sunny veranda made the perfect location for more deliciously fresh, local food.

Fuelled by sunshine and deliciousness, we arrived at the nearby Domaine Tropez

vineyard, where the lovely people from La Guêpe Mobile were waiting for us with an electric car for half of us and electric mopeds for the other half. In spite of a lifelong aversion to adrenaline, I chose one of the mopeds, and I couldn't have been happier with my decision. Our guide took us up to the hilltop village of Gassin, then along quiet roads, taking in a lighthouse, an old olive oil windmill and miles upon miles of stunning views. If you want to explore the area, this is a fantastic way of doing it.

We set off back to the villas to freshen up before heading back down into Sainte Maxime for dinner at Le Saint Barth, a glamorous beachside restaurant. Here, unsurprisingly, the food was delicious, with fresh fish galore, beautifully cooked meat and flavoursome cheeses. Aperitifs and more local wine provided the perfect accompaniment, and we headed back wonderfully satisfied yet again, ready to enjoy one (or two) last glasses of Ice Tropez by our pool.

They say you should do one thing every day that scares you, so I decided to follow this advice and take up the offer of parasailing in Grimaud – and it was another great decision! Seeing the whole bay, and everywhere we'd visited, from the sky was an incredible experience. For those less inclined to float sixty metres above the sea, but who still want to enjoy the sun, sea and sand, you can also enjoy a spot of paddle boarding or kayaking – or just lying on the beach!

The final evening was one to remember – we all headed up to one of the villas, where we had the absolute pleasure of enjoying a meal cooked for us by Maxime from Restaurant La Badiane. This was absolutely incredible from start to finish, and really gave us a chance to enjoy our incredible surroundings, as we watched the last of the setting sun and enjoyed even more local wine (there's still some left in the region, I promise).

One final breakfast, one final wander into Sainte-Maxime and one final quintessentially French lunch at the villas later, and our time in the area had drawn to a close. It will definitely not be my last time in the area, though. We may have packed a lot in, but I don't think we even came close to seeing everything the region has to offer, and I'll definitely be back for another parasail, a few more glasses of Ice Tropez and another tomato carpaccio!

Isobel Fitzharris

TRAVEL NOTES

Summer France, unlike many other companies, offer flexible arrivals in all their resorts and are flexible on the minimum number of nights. You choose when you want to go and for how long. Along with these villas on the Cote d'Azur, they also offer summer holidays in the mountains and to a number of other superb destinations in other parts of France; Mollets in south-west France (with the best beach in the Landes region!), the family friendly Vendée region, Provence and the beautiful lavender fields, on the Picardy coast and many other destinations around France. Find out more at: summerfrance.co.uk

