

SOMEWHERE ELSE THE FRENCH RIVIERA

*Cannes, bathed in the
golden light of dusk*

STARRY, STARRY NIGHTS

SYBARITIC HOTSPOTS, MAGNET FOR THE WORLD'S RICHEST AND MOST FAMOUS,
SUNIL MEHRA MAKES A HUMBLER PILGRIMAGE TO CANNES AND ST TROPEZ





Cafés in the old quarter of Cannes, Le Suquet

FORVILLE MARKET IS WHERE LOCALS PERFORM THE CLASSIC FRENCH RITUAL OF BUYING FRUITS, FLOWERS, VEGETABLES, MEATS, CHEESES

ALAMY/INDIAPICTURE

cascades of lush wisteria and wild rose creepers up to the hilltop ruins of the medieval monastery of Larins, seat of the powerful abbots who ruled the region in the Middle Ages, site of the Notre-Dame d'Espérance. The 12th-century Chapel of St Anne is now the Musée de la Castre which houses the collection of antiquities, musical instruments from Oceania, the Himalayas, Africa and the Arctic, bequeathed to the city by Baron Lycklama in 1877. I climb the 109 steps to the top of its 11th-century tower and gasp at the view—below me the Bay of Cannes and La Croisette; in the distance the island of St Honorat, the snow-clad Southern Alps.

Appetite stoked, it's time to descend for lunch at the very exclusive Carlton beach (hotel residents only). Superlative trout, delicate salad, seductive rosé, go down the hatch as I gaze at a sea the colour of Paul Newman's eyes. Post lunch we board a catamaran for the sun-kissed, caressed-by-sea-breeze ride, which ferries us to St Marguerite Island, famous for its prison that housed the enigmatic 'man in the iron mask' to whom 60 identities, including that of Louis XVth's twin, are ascribed. Voltaire, Dumas, and lately Hollywood, have recounted his legend. His large cell complete with fireplace had an adjoining altar. We visit the underground cannonball-proof room for storing gunpowder, see the ingenious water harvesting channels that steered rainwater off the roof into underground cisterns in an island with no drinking water, the erstwhile barracks that now host study groups, the museum that houses Roman sephorae, antiquities recovered from ships that once plied this vital maritime route and the site of the first-century Roman settlement within the fort, before walking out to the stunning terrace overlooking the sea facing the Cannes coastline. Whiff of scandal: at the other sequestered tip of the island lies the estate of Vijay Mallya. "Dirty money, no?" whispers Karin conspiratorially.

It's been a long day. I dine at the Carlton and turn in soon in anticipation of the early morning departure for St Tropez.

A scenic 1.5 hour drive past vineyards

Delhi in April. A blistering 40 degrees. A sudden chance to be in salubrious French Riviera—Cannes and St Tropez! Air France offers smiling upgrade to premium economy—chilled Sauvignon, great *poisson*, inflight movies. Time to slide deeper into one's seat, sleep, dream. Of a trip to the 'Côte d'Azur'—a landscape of colour with brilliant coastline, magnet to pilgrims seeking the holy trinity of sun, sand and sea. Immortalised on canvas by Picasso, Matisse, Chagall, Signac... Evoked in prose by Maugham, Sagan, Huxley, James, Fitzgerald... Since the latter half of the 19th century, playground of the rich and famous: Tsar Nicholas II, Princess Alexandra, Napoleon III, Leopold II of Belgium, King Edward VII, Queen Victoria, Winston Churchill,

Elton John, Sophia Loren, David Niven, Deborah Kerr, Jean Seberg, Versace, Coco Chanel, the Mittals, the Guccis, Dodi Fayed, Princess Diana, our own absconding felon Vijay Mallya. And, in a couple of hours, humble proletarian me!

Cannes: immortalised on celluloid by Hollywood, venue of the glitziest film festival in the world. St Tropez: emblazoned in the consciousness of generations of movie-goers by the sizzling Brigitte Bardot in *And God Created Woman*. Rich, cosmopolitan, sybaritic hotspots: blest with a plenitude of sun, vineyards producing prized wines, 115km of Mediterranean coastline dotted with expensive yachts, sailboats of billionaires, white sand beaches, 18 golf resorts, 14 ski resorts, 3,000 restaurants...

The three-hour wait in Charles de Gaulle airport for a connecting flight

to Nice is leavened by a rejuvenating shower, the extensive breakfast buffet and the *pièce de résistance*—French press coffee. Rested, fed, happy, I'm soon aboard the flight to Nice. My suitcase arrives in record time in the efficient airport and soon I'm in a comfortable van driving me to Nice. As we hit the road I absorb the sudden beauty around me: clear blue Mediterranean sky, swaying palms, hacienda-style homes, wrought-iron balconies, shuttered windows typical of the region.

We hit Cannes and cruise along the Promenade de la Croisette, the city's most expensive street that runs alongside the Mediterranean. Shops flaunting signboards of the most expensive things money can buy flash past—Fendi, Versace, Dolce & Gabbana, Tiffany, Cartier, Gucci, Van Cleef & Arpels... We

drive past a slew of five-star properties and cruise to a stop in front of the legendary 103-year-old Jewel of the Croisette—the seafront Carlton hotel. As the solicitous bellboy swoops in to collect my suitcase I stop to marvel at the iconic La Belle Otero—the twin cupolas of the hotel, said to be inspired by the breasts of the mistress of a frequent guest. This 1909 hotel was where Grace Kelly kissed Cary Grant outside Suite 623 in *To Catch a Thief*, where Elizabeth Taylor married eight times to seven different men and stayed under seven different names, where Faye Dunaway ordered goat's milk for her bath! The League of Nations first met here in 1922, the G20 in 2011.

I set out to explore the city with my knowledgeable guide, Karin Osmuk. We walk past the statue of British nobleman Henry Brougham, the man who settled

here in 1831 and put Cannes on the map of European aristocracy. And on to the Palais des Festival, venue of the Cannes film festival—the red carpet staircase familiar to TV audiences worldwide looms into view as also the handprints of film icons on the Esplanade Georges Pompidou. I loiter through the pedestrian Rue Meynadier with its speciality shops including the soap and perfume shop Fragonard, the Rue d'Antibes and the Rue Hoche area. We trot up a cobbled road into La Mirabelle, situated in a 200-year-old building in the old quarter of Le Suquet for an excellent seafood dinner.

Come morning, Karin walks me to the Forville Market where locals perform the French ritual of buying fresh fruits, flowers, vegetables, meats, fish, artisanal cheeses and preserves. We walk on through Suquet's picturesque alleys past



From top left: produce at Forville Market; biking on the Croisette; frolicking near the stunning coastline; yachts at St Tropez harbour

and rolling hills bathed in dappled sunlight and I'm in the über-chic seaside resort of St Tropez. I'm instantly charmed by the newly rebuilt Hotel de Paris. But I need shaggy sideburns and bell bottoms! Sixties decor by Sybille de Margerie in bright oranges and green, shimmering light fixtures, lobby with giant blowups of the town's presiding deity (and most famous resident) with the world's most famous pout, Ms Bardot! The sixties sex bomb's face is ubiquitous across hotels and restaurants in the city. Tropezians will proudly point to her boat, her villa, her parents' home. My lovely tour escort Valerie arrives to take me to Florent Abramides' Chateau

OUR ST TROPEZ-BY-BOAT JOY RIDE TAKES US PAST DODI AND DIANA'S LOVE NEST

de Marres vineyard, a 20-minute drive away. Florent, handsome sixth-generation vintner, greets us warmly and gives us an exposition on the intricacies of plucking, pressing, fermenting and

storing grapes to get the best white, red and rosé wines, before leading us through a wine-tasting that leaves me a wee bit drunk and buying two bottles each of his fragrant white and translucent rosés. En route to lunch at Key West restaurant for lunch with the octogenarian Henri Provost Allard, great grandson, believe it or not, of General Allard who once commanded the armies of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, Valerie gives me a dose of local history.

The fishing village was christened St Tropez in the 11th century by St Victor's monks after Torpes, an officer beheaded for his Christian faith by Nero in Pisa, 68 AD. The body, set afloat in a boat, arrived in St Tropez bay. The hamlet grew into a maritime trade centre, its expert seamen travelling beyond Cape Horn, Africa, India; its bravehearts—Bailli de Suffren,



BRIGITTE BARDOT IS ST TROPEZ'S PRESIDING DEITY (AND MOST FAMOUS RESIDENT)

Glamour central: at a jetty in St Tropez

Hippolyte Bouchard, Allard—became the stuff of legend. The Pampelonne beach, where sky and water threaten to out-blue each other, is the very stuff of memory. And lunch at Key West is gourmet heaven!

We rush out next for a St Tropez-by-boat excursion that takes us whizzing past Dodi and Diana's love nest, past Luis Vuitton, past the coastal villas of Doris Day, the Mittals, Donatella Versace and Bardot. We disembark for a tour of the old quarter: the medieval fruit, meat, vegetable market, city centre, town hall, its charming crêperies, the sea-facing La Ponche (a boutique hotel now) where Vadim shot *And God Created Woman*. The town, devastated by German mines in WWII, was rebuilt in the original style by the fundraising genius of the writer Colette and the citizenry. Handmade sandals from Rondini, the legendary third-generation Tropezian sandal-maker, were expensive but irresistible!

A strong mistral tunnelling through the winding lanes was threatening to blow us off our feet by the time we landed at the hotel. A quick change later Valerie walked

me in a drizzle to Auberge des Maures at Rue Boutin. "You won't regret it," she smiled. I didn't! The meal was divine.

The next morning was about walking past men playing pétanque at the Place des Lices, shopping for sailor-stripe tees and moccasins at the adjacent flea market en route to the Museum of Maritime History in the Citadel of St Tropez. Monsieur Allard led us through a fascinating tour of rooms displaying models of ships, maps, navigation instruments, moving evocations of Tropezian navigations worldwide when skill, expertise and ingenuity was all that lay between them and the Great Beyond. Allard's ancestor, Ranjit Singh's army chief, finds pride of place here where he's honoured with a bust. The Citadel offers one of the most stunning views of the coast and is one of the most visited sites in southeastern France. We walk down tired but happy for lunch at the quay-facing, sand-floored L'Escale, where the decor consisted chiefly of blown-up prints of Bardot (what else!).

My last night in St Tropez was a romantic, fitting finale to the trip. Monsieur Allard, also Deputy Mayor

Tourism, invited me to the Rue Gambetta for dinner at Pan Dei Palais, the ancestral house he'd never lived in, now an exquisite 12-room boutique hotel complete with gurgling water fountains, kilims, mirrorwork wall hangings, Malabar furniture, bronze Krishna figurines. Over a delicious dinner in the spectacular dining room, hand-painted with spiralling Tree of Life motifs inset with glowing tea lights, he told me the story of his great-grandfather, General Jean Francois Allard, a soldier in Napoleon's army who landed in Ranjit Singh's Lahore court in 1822.

At the Maharaja's behest he raised a brigade of 6,000, the Fauji Khas, who he trained in European fighting techniques—they learned to respond to his commands in French! The Maharaja, delighted to have troops who could combat the British menace with European military stratagems, appointed the 40-year-old General as Royal Advisor and married him to his niece, the 15-year-old Chamba princess, Manu Pandey. She reciprocated his passion wholeheartedly and bore him seven children, the last of whom was born in St Tropez where

THE FRENCH RIVIERA

THOMAS STANKIEWICZ/LOOK/DINODIA



The façade of Cannes' famous Carlton

he brought her in 1834 and set her up in a house stuffed with Indian paintings and antiquities. General Allard returned to India two years later where he died after two years. He lies buried in Lahore between the graves of two of his children. Manu converted to Christianity, became a member of French society and pined for her husband till the day she died in 1884. Her tombstone in St Tropez carries a simple inscription: 'The General's Wife'. We listened in hushed silence late into the night. Monsieur Allard was in India this July at the invitation of the Punjab government, which was installing a statue of General Allard and Ranjit Singh to commemorate the historic connection. St Tropez is doing likewise.

I said goodbye, stepped out into the clear night and walked to the hotel under a sapphire sky studded with stars that glowed like diamonds. Much like the memory of this evening.

THE INFORMATION

GETTING THERE

Nice airport is a one-stop flight away from India, via Paris, Zurich, Munich and other European hubs as well some in the Middle East too. Economy fares start from approx. ₹45,000 return.

WHERE TO STAY

> IN CANNES: The **InterContinental Carlton** on La Croisette Boulevard is a historic hotel with a splendid Belle Époque façade and a panoramic view of the Bay of Cannes and Lerins Island. Room rates begin from approx. ₹20,000; ihg.com.

> IN ST TROPEZ: **Hôtel de Paris** is a vintage hotel that the sixties' jetset frequented, built afresh by architect Francois Vieillecroze and decorated by Sybille de Margerie in the spirit of the age—shimmering lights, bright greens and oranges, iconic pop motifs. Room rates begin from approx. ₹19,500; hoteldeparis-sainttropez.com.

And, um, there's no such thing as a 'cheap hotel' in either of these glamorous towns. Your best bet would be to try your luck at airbnb.com.

WHAT TO SEE & DO

> IN CANNES: **Boulevard Croisette** is the place for the high-end labels and swanky shops as are Rue d'Antibes and the Rue Hoche area. Definitely check out the **Palais des Festival et des Congrès**, the venue for the famous film festival, and the film star hand imprints on Esplanade Georges Pompidou. Visit the **Sunday flea market**, 500m ahead on the other side of the road—on sale are handmade belts, antiques and assorted bric-a-brac. Explore Le **Suquet** in the old quarter, with its cobbled winding streets and charming eateries. Walk up to see the **Musée de la Castre** and to get sweeping views of the

town and the Bay of Cannes. The pedestrian **Rue Meynadier** offers great affordable shopping options apart from the artisanal cheeses, soaps and fragrances the region is famous for. **St Marguerite Island**, site of Fort Royal and the Maritime Museum, is a must-do: there's a catamaran service every day (7.30am-5.30pm). The tourism office next to the Palais des Festival is happy to help with queries, brochures and guided tours.

> IN ST TROPEZ: The Citadel, the **boat ride along the coastline** dotted with villas of the rich and (in)famous. But also stroll to the **Place de Lices** to watch stately old Frenchmen playing pétanque, check out the Tue/Sat flea market opposite where you can buy cheeses, preserves, olive oil, tees, antiques and handmade Italian moccasins for unbelievably low prices. Don't forget to visit **Rondini**, bespoke

sandal-maker at Rue Georges Clemenceau; Rue de Commerçants in the old quarter has great moccasins too. Lovely stretch cotton shorts in vibgyor shades, the St Tropez uniform, can be had at Les Canebières at Place de la Croix de Fer. Watch the glorious sunset at the harbour where Bardot's little boat, *Piu Piu*, lies docked next to the glitzy speedboats of the jetset. Sip a 10-euro coffee at the posh 1887 harbour cafe **Sénéquier**; dine at sea-facing restaurants serving superb international cuisine. Do remember to check out the town symbol—the 1634 vintage **Notre Dame de l'Assomption**; its bell tower has four faces but only three have clocks! Finally, what's a South of France trip without a wine tasting? Book a session at **Chateau Des Marres** (write to sales manager Laurent Natalini at contact@chateau-audesmarres.com). ■ SUNIL MEHRA