



DESTINATION

From my room at the InterContinental Carlton Cannes, I could see the Boulevard de la Croisette curling around the bay, a sparkling steel blue, studded with flecks of aquamarine. Cannes is a city of the seventh art, namely cinema, a term christened by film theoretician Ricciotto Canudo—where glamour, business and wealth revel in the heart of the Côte-d'Azur. After all, it was at the Carlton that Grace Kelly met Prince Rainier III of Monaco, while shooting Hitchcock's *To Catch A Thief*, a rendezvous that led to the love story of the century.

In 1915, the town, which wears on its stylish sleeve its fishing heritage, was classified as a seaside resort by a ministerial decree. Once upon a time, it was a lookout for Lord Rodoard, Prince

of Antibes and founder of the powerful House of Grasse. The tiny fishing harbour, overrun by reed beds, had a moniker 'Portu Canuae.' Now, it's the backyard of billionaires and a playground of plenty.

The global village is an important canvas for cinema. Just around the corner is the Palais des Festivals et des Congrès, which is the beating heart of this Provençal town of around 74,000 inhabitants. If Cannes attracts 200,000 tourists during the summers, the city draws in 200,000 visitors during the Cannes festival—a business which in 2014, generated over €70.2 million euro for the region. The festival has catapulted Cannes into the limelight in India, especially in the past decade, when our own beauties Aishwarya Rai Bachchan, Mallika Sherawat

and Sonam Kapoor have walked the red carpet, while others such as Vidya Balan and Nandita Das have been part of the international jury. Alas, in its 70th edition, no Indian films have made it, a sad evolution from when Chetan Anand's *Neecha Nagar* and Satyajit Ray's *Pather Panchali* won the Palm d'Or. But, the Festival de Cannes is just one of the many on the roster of the events held throughout the year at the Palais, which hosts approximately 120 events, generating more than €840 million in economic benefits, and 17,000 jobs per year, according to official data. While one might be seduced to think that tourism generates the most revenue, we are told that actually, the biggest money spinner is the Thales Alenia Space company, which is headquartered in Cannes. Interestingly, the French luxury industry is estimated to generate annual sales of over €150 billion, more than the country's aerospace and automobile sectors, according to a 2016 study by the Institut Français de la Mode. Sitting with my toes in the sand at Carlton's beach restaurant, I dug into a platter of lush oysters and barely registered this incongruous nugget of information.

But satellites and stars make perfect sense. Having spent the day admiring the Art Deco and Belle Époque architecture at the sea side town, I dawdled past luxury storefronts gleaming with silks and solitaires. Shopping in the glitzy Riviera quietly out charms even the most hallowed shopping boulevards, given that Cannes has over 3,200 boutiques. Later

With rich, flamboyant histories and a jet-set present, Cannes and Saint-Tropez add a sparkle to France

By Neeti Mehra

CELEBRATING THE SOUTH

The luxurious InterContinental Carlton Cannes, with its Belle Époque facade, is one of a triumvirate of hotels favoured by film stars, along with the Majestic Barrière and the Martinez



that night, away from the Croisette, with its luxury boutiques, palace hotels and the Palais des Festival, we supped at the rustic Le Suquet district, where you were instantly reminded of Cannes's Provençal heritage. The next day at the Vieux Port, we alighted a ferry to one of the two emerald isles—Iles de Lérins—to Sainte-Marguerite, a verdant forest of eucalyptuses and centuries-old pine trees, home to the massive Fort Royal, a warren of complex buildings dating back to the 17th century, built by King Louis XIV. One of its most famous residents was the Man in the Iron Mask, whose legend has been immortalised in many literary tomes. Who was he? The twin (bastard) brother of Louis XIV? Or his true heir—the Duc de Beaufort? While his identity is still in the mist, the island, like Cannes, has other famed residents, taking up luxe second homes, including Vijay Mallya.

Why do people lay anchor permanently in the region, when they can own a floating home, a super yacht, of utmost decadence? In an article in a magazine, a head of a real estate consultancy summed up Cannes' allure succinctly, saying, "People don't buy a property in the South of

France to make money." Beyond the sun, surf, sand, the restaurants, the museums and the culture, are the golf courses, tennis courts, polo grounds and hiking trails. The ski resorts are little over an hour away. Provence's lush vineyards and honeyed lavender meadows are close by, and Monaco, with its bustling casinos, is a mere trot away. It's a great time to invest in the region. According to consultancy Knight Frank, the sales price of prime properties in Cannes is at least 30 per cent below its peak 2007 levels, with prices along the La Croisette ranging between \$2,500 to \$5,000 per square foot, sea views, naturally, commanding the highest price.

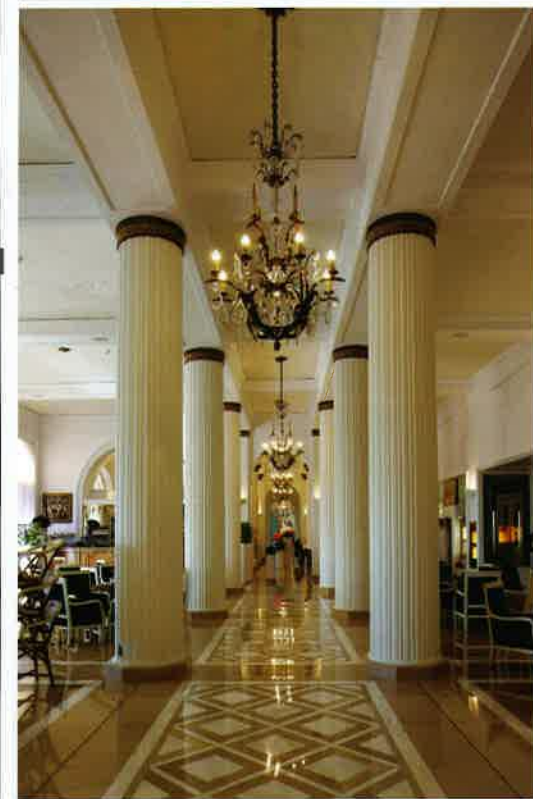
As I write this piece, Emmanuel Macron, the centrist independent candidate has won a polarising election, a decisive win in what has been a challenging year for the country. It has

Clockwise from top: The Pan Dei Palais is a historic country mansion house in Saint-Tropez; America's golden girl, actress Grace Kelly met Prince Rainier of Monaco at the InterContinental Carlton Cannes in the 1950s; The region is famed for its rosé wine; Gorge on local French delicacies and explore the traditional markets like Cannes' Marches Forville; Enjoying the sun, sand and surf in Cannes; Château des Marres is owned by the Benet-Gartich family, which has run the winery since five generations





Clockwise from top left: The glamorous village with sunshine and a craggy coastline has attracted artists such as pointillist Paul Signac and the likes of Matisse and Bonnard and celebrities such as Gigi Hadid and Leonardo DiCaprio; the Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur region is a fantastic golfing destination for both amateur and confirmed players; Le Suquet is the old quarter of Cannes, a warren of winding cobbled lanes lined with local restaurants



been nearly a year since the horrific Bastille Day attacks at Nice, that's less than an hour's drive from Cannes. Taking no chances, for the 70th edition of the Cannes Film Festival, security was beefed up. Retractable bollards and concrete barriers aside, the super yacht arena was completely unassailable, as a pantheon of stars descended on this French gem.

Little over an hour away, abutting a peninsula, is Saint-Tropez, a port village that's home to the sepulchral Brigitte Bardot and just around 4,700 other residents. For its girth, Saint-Tropez pulls in an impressive six million visitors who wade in the waters of its 20 km long stretch of beaches, shop in its 800 odd boutique shops and sup in its Michelin-starred restaurants. On arrival, we were greeted by the icy le mistral, a fierce, cold wind barrelling through the port, chilling my bones as we explored the old city. Stopping by at one of France's longest-established modern art galleries, Musée de l'Annonciade, ensconced in a 16th century former chapel, we passed men playing Pétanque at the central square, before we halted at the majestic Citadel. In Saint-Tropez I got my first taste of French craftsmanship at Rondini, creators of *Sandales Tropeziennes*. Behind the famous sandals are a family of cobblers, the Rondinis, who started the enterprise in 1927. The workshop behind the

store front bustled with activity, as sandals and other accessories were shaped from scratch by craftsmen—simple, sturdy and hand-stamped, as raw and earthy as artisanal-luxury can be, a fine example of a family that never lost its handmade credentials along the way. Later at lunch at the Mediterranean seafood restaurant, l'Escala at the Quai Jean Jaurès, the port area, our guide, Sylvie Brissaud pointed towards the yachts. Just to moor at the port for a night would set you back by a neat €1,500.

But it isn't the aquamarine blue that's the only attraction of the region. The next day, we drove to Château des Marres, run by the now fifth generation of the Benet-Gartich family, producing some of the most elegant, delicious rosé of France, a medley of Grenache, Cinsault, and Mourvèdre grapes. The estate, spread over acres of emerald hills, with a glittering backdrop of the sea, is very different from France's other more celebrated wine regions. As we sipped and swirled our way through the tasting, I was told that 80 per cent of wine produced here was rosé, classified appellation AOC Côtes de Provence. A majority of the production is consumed domestically, and around 20 per cent of it made its way across the globe, from the Bahamas to Morocco, but not India yet. But, the family saw a growing interest in the wine from Indian visitors.

The gleaming, modern winery is a perfect foil to the process of handpicking grapes. Since three generations, a few families from Spain have been making their way to pick grapes during the harvest season, the latter which has advanced by nearly a month, a startling effect of global warming in the lap of paradise.

My final stop, before I made my way to Paris and succumb to its big city charms, was the Pan Deï Palais, a glorious historic hotel which has a part of India in its soul. Its tale is entwined with our history, dating back to 1820, when the army general, the Frenchman Jean-François Allard was forced into exile after Napoleon was defeated. From Egypt, his destiny led him to India, where Maharaja Ranjit Singh engaged him to modernise his army to take on the British. In the siege of Chamba, the 40-year-old captain fell in love with the kingdom's princess, Bannu Pan Deï and married her, building this grand Provencal home for his family in 1835. A profusion of colours and textures, with its bright ochre façade and molten red bric-a-bracs, we settled down in the dining room, decorated with a fantasical scene from an Indian jungle, replete with flying monkeys and birds with exotic plumages. During our visit to Saint-Tropez, Henri Prévost-Allard, also the deputy mayor in charge of tourism, the descendant of the general and his lovely wife, made us feel at home. An Indophile, Prévost-Allard has made numerous trips to Punjab, and was working on an English translation of the book on the general penned by him. A grand bust of Maharaja Ranjit Singh has been unveiled in Allard Square, and even a film on the subject might be on the anvil, strengthening the Indo-French connection.

As I walked around the bay, the intense Mediterranean light accentuating the red roofs, blue sky and the silvery waters; I could only hope to imprint this sun-drenched landscape to memory, a scenery that inspired Henri-Émile-Benoît Matisse and Coco Chanel in equal measure. ■