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GOING TO

Nice

By **SETH SHERWOOD**

WHY GO NOW Sun-baked Mediterranean coastline and palm-planted boulevards notwithstanding, Nice, the fifth-largest city in [France](#), has had a somewhat iffy reputation of late, thanks to an elevated crime rate, political corruption and a mayor formerly aligned with the far-right National Front party. There was, for many, the sense that the best days of Henri Matisse's former home were far behind it. Key attractions like the century-old Russian Orthodox Cathédrale de St. Nicolas **(1)** and the two-century-old oceanfront boardwalk, the English-built Promenade des Anglais, nostalgically recalled the bygone time when Czarist aristocrats and British royals wintered in the area. The city's most glorious Jazz Age hotel, the Palais de la Méditerranée, **(2)** sat desolate and abandoned along the seaside.

But there are signs that the tides may be turning. In the Old Port and the Old Town, sleek new nightclubs are commandeering the rustic buildings and trying to elevate Nice's nocturnal vibe to the level of its swanky coastal neighbors, Cannes and St.-Tropez. On the culinary front, a group of ambitious young chefs is rejuvenating the olive- and anchovy-heavy dishes of classic Provençal cuisine. Most notably, the Palais de la Méditerranée has finally risen from its ashes, leading a small but impressive hotel boom and serving as a symbol of Nice's nascent resurgence. Though some rough edges remain, the Côte d'Azur capital is starting to sparkle anew.

WHERE TO STAY Opened originally as casino in 1929 by the American financier Frank Jay Gould, the Art Deco masterpiece Palais de la Méditerranée, 13-15, promenade des Anglais, (33-4) 92.14.77.00, on the Web at www.lepalaisdelamediterranee.com, once catered to such clients as Charlie Chaplin, Coco Chanel and Josephine Baker but was eventually shuttered in 1978, and largely demolished by 1990. The Taittinger group (makers of Taittinger champagne) financed the reconstruction, completed last year, by specialists who had worked on the Chartres cathedral. The new version has 188 rooms and suites, sea views, a colonnaded indoor-and-outdoor pool, a casino and the ambitious Padouk restaurant. In low season, double rooms start at \$350, at \$1.25 to the euro; summer doubles start at \$470.

Almost equally impressive refurbishments have transformed the Belle Époque-era Hôtel Beau Rivage, **(3)** 24, rue St.-François de Paule, (33-4) 92.47.82.82, www.nicebeaurivage.com, from a fuddy-duddy into a den of modern sleekness. Chekhov and F. Scott Fitzgerald would hardly recognize their old rooms, which now combine flat-screen televisions, angular furnishings and smooth wood

surfaces. The hotel's trump card is its private beach, which costs \$17.50 for guests. Low season doubles from about \$180; summer doubles from \$344.

Travelers seeking the future of hotel design should park their spaceships at the Hi, **(4)** 3, avenue des Fleurs, (33-4) 97.07.26.26, www.hi-hotel.net, an aggressively postmodern, high-tech property conceived by Matali Crasset, the Philippe Starck protégé. The 38 rooms employ conceits ranging from "sofablasters" (couches with stereo speakers) to furnishings with lightboxes to beds that become bathtubs. A self-service food "laboratory" serves organic breakfasts, and the colorful Happy Bar plays host to weekend D.J.'s. Doubles from \$225.

WHERE TO EAT To scale Nice's new culinary heights, splurge on the \$38 taxi ride into the hills overlooking the city and stop at Parcours Live, **(5)** 1, place Marcel Eusebi, (33-4) 93.84.94.57, in Falicon. Opened two years ago and already Michelin-starred, the restaurant offers a sublime view and a menu that changes weekly from the chef Jean-Marc Delacourt. Recent offerings have included risotto with summer truffles and Mediterranean tuna crusted with sesame seeds on a soy-soaked potato purée. The house sommelier, Franck Thomas, who was voted best sommelier in [Europe](#) in 2000, offers a globe-spinning wine card representing France, [Slovenia](#), [Thailand](#) and beyond. Three courses cost \$44.

Back in town, Keisuke Matsushima, a 27-year-old cook, draws clued-in niçois gastronomes to his tiny, intimate restaurant, Kei's Passion, **(6)** 22, rue de France, Place Croix de Marbre, (33-4) 93.82.26.06. Using hardy southern French ingredients as his departure point, Mr. Matsushima alchemically works them into delicate, clever and exquisitely presented dishes like red tomato gazpacho with a scoop of bright green basil-almond sorbet. A three-course meal for two is about \$160, without wine.

Though the stone walls and wooden beams lend the restaurant a 19th-century farmhouse feel, Jouni, **(7)** 10, rue Lascaris, (33-4) 97.08.14.80, executes its daily-changing menu with contemporary precision. And no wonder: the Finnish chef-owner, Jouni Tormanen, who is in his 30's, cut his culinary teeth at Alain Ducasse restaurants in [Paris](#) and Monaco before opening his own establishment three years ago. Dishes radiate a classic niçois style with an occasional cooking-school flourish. A given night might feature appetizers such as anchovies on toast followed by lamb chops with stuffed eggplant slices. Three courses cost \$63.

WHAT TO DO DURING THE DAY Outdoor enthusiasts should stroll the scenic Promenade des Anglais and trot down to one of the many public - and pebbly - beaches alongside it. (A more comfortable option is the private Lido Beach, **(8)** across from the Palais de la Méditerranée, where \$12.50 gets you a cushioned chaise longue.)

Indoor enthusiasts might hit the small Musée Matisse, **(9)** 164, avenue des Arènes, (33-4) 93.81.08.08, which houses gorgeously abstract stained glass and two rooms of paper cut-outs by the French master, as well as two rooms of paintings. Admission: \$5.

The proudly crushed automobile greeting visitors to the permanent collection at the Musée d'Art Moderne et d'Art Contemporain, **(10)** Promenade des Arts, (33-4) 93.62.61.62, is an apt metaphor for an institution stocked with iconoclasts, outlaw artists and avant-garde figures. Ellsworth Kelly, Frank Stella, Donald Judd, Robert Indiana, Richard Serra and Keith Haring are major names in the American-heavy collection. Admission is \$5.

WHAT TO DO AT NIGHT You half expect to watch "Welcome Back Kotter" when confronted with the decorative 1970's televisions at Smarties, **(11)** 10, rue Defly, (33-4) 93.62.30.75. Dedicated to modern electronic jazz, the two-year-old retro-cool lounge features D.J.'s on Tuesdays. Closed in August and on Saturdays.

The bilevel, preparty spot Liqwid, **(12)** 11, rue Alexandre Mari, (33-4) 93.76.14.28, features D.J.'s nightly. Opened last December, it's the slickest new address in the Old Town, complete with leather or velvet seating, flat-screen television and bottles of Perrier Jouet Champagne for \$113.

Come midnight, savvy clubbers sail over to the Port. The new White Lab, **(13)** 26, quai Lunel, (33-6) 88.08.26.15, draws a spirited 20-something crowd to its white and pink confines. More sophisticated decadence unfurls across the harbor at Guest, 5, quai des Deux Emmanuel, (33-4) 93.56.83.83, the newest addition to the Nice club scene. Low lighting, deep banquettes, candelabra and chandeliers provide the atmosphere for an air-kissing, Dom Pérignon-swilling, see-and-be-seen crowd from 25 to 45.

WHERE TO SHOP Get your clubwear at Espace Harroch, **(14)** 7, rue Paradis, (33-4) 93.82.50.23, a new four-level concept store stocking top labels for women and men, including Lanvin, Balenciaga, Paul Smith and Jil Sander - as well as home décor.

Then stroll into the Provençal food shops on Rue St.-François de Paule. Terre de Truffles, **(15)** 11, rue St.-François de Paule, (33-4) 93.62.07.68, is a trove of puréed Provençal truffles (\$73 for about 7 ounces), black truffles from Périgord (\$300 for about 3.5 ounces) and similar delicacies. The venerable olive oil specialist Moulin à Huile Alziari, **(16)** 14, rue St. François de Paule, (33-4) 93.85.76.92, stocks fresh olives, olive oil soaps and, of course, extra virgin olive oil (about \$15 a quart).

HOW TO STAY WIRED Just off the Promenade des Anglais, Mail Service.Nice, **(17)** 6, rue Meyerbeer, (33-4) 93.16.17.74, charges \$5 an hour for computer access.

YOUR FIRST TIME OR YOUR 10TH Lose yourself in Nice's postcard-perfect Old Town. Within the spider web of narrow paved passageways, a myriad of olive-oil dealers, soap sellers, spice merchants, sidewalk cafes and Baroque churches burst from among richly colored buildings - peach, sunflower yellow, pistachio green - that seem to have absorbed all the colors of the Riviera's bounty. Be sure to stop at the 17th-century St.-Réparate Basilica **(18)** and at the adjacent Place Rossetti and taste tomatoes, avocados and beer-in ice-cream form from the creative ice-cream parlor Fenocchio

(\$2.50 a scoop); (33-4) 93.80.72.52.

HOW TO GET THERE Air France offers direct flights from Kennedy Airport to Nice with midweek fares starting around \$300 in mid- to late September, if booked through the Web site, www.airfrance.us. Delta Air Lines also has direct flights from Kennedy to Nice, starting around \$600 during the same period.

GETTING AROUND Downtown Nice and the adjacent Old Town are easily walkable. The bus system (\$1.60 a ride) is useful for reaching the Musée Matisse (Line 15 or 17) and the Cathedral of St. Nicholas (Line 7). Taxis are quite expensive: a journey of a few miles can cost upward of \$25.

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