
July 30, 2006

The Barefoot Riviera

By SETH SHERWOOD**Correction Appended**

CAST in gray metal, the sculptural face of an old man gazes nostalgically at the low pastel buildings, convivial cafes and bobbing fishing boats that line the sun-dappled Côte d'Azur port of Villefranche-sur-Mer.

“When I look at Villefranche, I see my youth,” reads the inscription on the statue’s pedestal. “May it never change.”

They are the words of Jean Cocteau. Divinely talented, ceaselessly inventive and openly gay, Cocteau, the poet-painter-playwright-film director, arrived in this town in the southeast corner of [France](#) in the 1920’s and found an artistic retreat and muse for masterpieces like “Orpheus” and “Les Enfants Terribles.”

Today, some 80 years after Cocteau first holed up at the Hôtel Welcome — where he received collaborators like [Picasso](#), Stravinsky and Isadora Duncan — the town’s old center seems as impervious to time as his own frozen likeness. The Welcome is still the town’s finest hotel. The 16th-century stone citadel still looms over the sea of orange-tiled roofs. The chimes of venerable church bells still reverberate through the covered, cavernlike Rue Obscure and other timeworn cobbled passages.

If Cocteau turned his head 180 degrees, he could almost see the big, bustling city of Nice a few miles away. But the 15th-century core of Villefranche, hidden between two rocky outcroppings, feels sheltered from its influence.

“It’s kind of untouched, or untouchable,” said Ted Jones, a Villefranche resident who has chronicled Cocteau and other writers in his book, “The French Riviera: A Literary Guide for Travelers.” “It’s a 10-minute bus ride from Nice, and yet it’s very much different,” he went on. “It feels very much apart.”

Greetings from the Côte d’Obscure. Far richer in Old World settings and artist-bohemian history than in contemporary glitz and celebrity, towns like Villefranche form a Riviera hidden in plain sight, lurking quietly in the shadows of zillion-watt Côte d’Azur neighbors like Nice, Cannes and Monaco.

Along the Côte d’Obscure, the Riviera sun shines just as radiantly, the Mediterranean waters are just

as warm and the olive- and tomato-soaked Provençal cuisine is just as succulent (and sometimes more so). At the same time, last year's fashions can be sported with impunity, and almost no one arrives by megayacht. Walking the cobbled lanes of Cagnes, Eze and Villefranche-sur-Mer, you're more likely to tread the paths of celebrated painters, writers and philosophers than rub shoulders with the Hilton sisters.

If liberty, equality and fraternity are the pillars of the French Republic, those of the Côte d'Obscure could be called antiquity, artistry and gastronomy.

A warm Sunday in June draws worshipers of all stripes to Villefranche. The traditional sort file into the peach and gold Baroque edifice of St.-Michel church. Devotees of bargains and bric-a-brac, meanwhile, meander through the weekly flea market in Place Amélie Pollonnais. Amid buildings in warm Mediterranean hues of ochre, yellow and pale green — as if the masons squeezed strawberries, lemons and limes directly into the plaster mix — shoppers poke among Napoleonic hats, Art Nouveau clocks and strange Gallic detritus emptied from forgotten drawers.

Chimes from the 14th-century Chapelle de St.-Pierre summon yet another small flock: the aesthetes. Painted by Cocteau 50 years ago, the interior simmers with colorful, almost hallucinatory scenes from St. Peter's life. Faceless angels, flying fish, floating sea horses and disembodied eyeballs erupt from all corners. The church holds only one religious service a year — for the festival of St. Peter, in late June — but draws year-round visits for the fever-dream décor alone.

As if channeling Cocteau's spirit, another set of bohemians rolled into Villefranche 35 years ago this summer to try to summon their own genius: the [Rolling Stones](#). Self-exiled from [England](#) to avoid heavy income taxes, the group holed up in the basement of a Villefranche villa to work on new recordings. But the sessions were snakebit from the start. Stifling heat, frequent power failures, distracting hangers-on, band acrimony and the theft of all the guitars belonging to Keith Richards — who was frequently strung out on heroin and eventually busted by the French police — augured doom. Somehow, the Stones spun the craziness into gold. The resulting album, "Exile on Main Street," remains a masterpiece.

These days, the town seems to be aging much better than Mr. Richards and [Mick Jagger](#). It's certainly quieter for their absence. As dusk envelopes the harborside cafes and accordionists' melodies fill the sea air, culinary pilgrims fill La Mère Germaine restaurant. Little altered since it opened in the 1930's, the restaurant, a seafood temple, hums with chatter as servers in white shirts and bow ties ladle up steaming bowls of bouillabaisse teeming with shrimp, mussels and mullet from the adjacent waters. Couples dressed in white linen smoke Gitanes and sip glasses of pink Bandol rosé as they consume the dish. It's one more enduring Villefranche specialty that Cocteau would be heartened to recognize.

WHEN the town of Eze was founded in the eighth century, its eagle's-nest perch atop a cliff offered protection from invaders. More than a millennium later, the village — looming 1,400 feet over the

Mediterranean — has also kept many trappings of modernity at bay. Automobiles, electric signs and visible power lines don't penetrate the fairy tale setting. Indeed, with its tapering spires and ivy-draped Gothic stone structures, the place feels crystallized from the imagination of Ursula K. Le Guin or C. S. Lewis. It's the Riviera's answer to Mont St.-Michel, floating in the Côte d'Azur sky rather than the Normandy sea.

All over, the cobbled streets echo with footsteps of travelers making the spiraling ascent to the ruined chateau at the village pinnacle. Upward they climb through the whorls, past studded wooden doors and iron-barred windows; past iron caldrons overflowing with fiery red flowers; past the 14th-century Chapelle de la Ste.-Croix; past the Baroque church Notre-Dame de l'Assomption. All the scene lacks is a group of chanting Gregorian monks.

"Though the ground keeps me rooted, my mind is in the heavens," reads a plaque at the summit. Spread dramatically below is one of the region's most awesome panoramas: gray cliffs, green-brown hills, white villas and, extending to the vanishing point, the deep blue of the breeze-swept Mediterranean.

Adding to the enchantment, the castle ruins have been reborn as a "Jardin Exotique." Among the collapsed battlements and crumbled stones grow unusual plant specimens — yucca, aloe, agaves, cactuses — fetched from the world's four corners.

Almost inevitably, Eze's surroundings have seduced their share of famous figures. Consuelo Vanderbilt and Anastasia Mikhailovna, the grand duchess of [Russia](#), had homes in Eze. So did [Prince William](#) of [Sweden](#), whose four-century-old former residence is now the elite Château Eza hotel. Far below the cliffs and along the ocean, in a satellite township known as Eze-bord-de-Mer, the onetime villa of Prince Stroganov of Russia has recently become the ritzy hotel Cap Estel. Among the hotel's seaside neighbors is a member of the modern-day rock 'n' roll royalty, the [U2](#) singer [Bono](#).

But perhaps no one was more charmed by Eze than Frederick Nietzsche. Though he spent only a short holiday in the area in the 1880's, the environment had a profound tonic effect on the famously troubled philosopher.

"I slept well, I laughed a lot, and I found a marvelous vigor and patience," he later recalled. He also found the inspiration for the third part of "Thus Spake Zarathustra," much of which was composed in his head while hiking the steep trail from the seaside to the medieval village. The route is now known officially as Le Chemin de Nietzsche: Nietzsche's Path. Winding up a forested ravine, the quiet trail lends itself naturally to contemplation. Birds chirp. Leaves rustle. The gravel path crunches below your feet. The sea washes below, beyond the scent of pines. Here, the decadent beach clubs and loud night spots of the teeming Riviera resorts are as immaterial as the low clouds drifting past. When the going gets strenuous, try repeating Zarathustra's mantra from his own sojourn through the mountains: "You are treading your path of greatness. No one shall steal after you here."

FOR the Impressionist master Pierre-Auguste Renoir, the path of greatness led ultimately to the village of Cagnes-sur-Mer, where he retired about 100 years ago. For the aging Renoir, the sun-soaked hills of the medieval Cagnes helped soothe his rheumatoid pains and inspire his ever-prolific palette. Indeed, not even arthritis so severe that brushes needed to be tied to his gnarled hands dampened his motivation to capture the olive groves and age-old stone streets near his home, now the Musée Renoir.

By the time of his death in 1919, so many Parisian painters had followed Renoir to Cagnes that it became nicknamed the Montmartre of the Côte d'Azur. Tsugoharu Foujita and Chaim Soutine moved in. André Derain transformed the Middle Ages geometry of the town into fractured experiments in form. Yves Klein and the writer Georges Simenon would follow in subsequent decades. Even Modigliani, who scarcely painted outdoors, was moved to capture the storybook lanes and red-tiled cottages.

“It was an era where people painted a lot of landscapes, and the village and the streets and the hills are magnificent here,” said Eric Caleca, president of the group Artists of Cagnes-sur-Mer. “Cagnes has always attracted artists because of its scenery.”

Sitting in a cafe by the town's crenellated castle, the Château Grimaldi, Mr. Caleca expanded on the spot's enduring appeals: “There's a real tranquillity here — no cars, no crowds. There are no journalists chasing after celebrities.”

The past still breathes from every pore of Haut-de-Cagnes, the rustic medieval hamlet at the center of the otherwise modern town. Perched on a hill, the spider web of streets is a painterly collage of hewed stone and iron, timber and masonry, twisted tree stumps and radiant flowers. Stone passageways splinter off in all directions, leading through low tunnels into secret plazas hung with flaming purple bougainvilleas.

Though Cagnes's avant-garde heyday has passed, a bit of the Montmartre vibe still suffuses the place. On certain nights, the strains of Edith Piaf or Django Reinhardt might spill out into the cafe-lined Place du Château from the Black Cat, a newish jazz joint named for Le Chat Noir, the notorious Montmartre nightclub of yore.

Modern art is also in the air. The Château Grimaldi holds rotating exhibits by promising contemporary artists. (Through Oct. 22 it's putting on a show by Louis Cane, whose Pop Art religious scenes suggest Peter Max via the [Vatican](#).) Next door, the multilevel Maison des Artistes gallery does likewise. Next year it will display photographs by Jacques Renoir, the great-grandson of the painter and a cinematographer who still resides in Cagnes.

But these days the dinner plate rivals the canvas as Cagnes's claim to fame, thanks to a trio of Michelin-starred restaurants. According to the menu at Le Cagnard, a restaurant tucked in a 13th-century building along the town's former ramparts, “from the castle's high walls, the lordship

used to control the enemy's approach." Perched over a deep ravine, the elegant Old World restaurant is now well positioned against invading hordes of gourmands desperate to storm the Versailles-light dining room and taste Jean-Yves Johanny's risotto with langoustines in truffle butter.

But no restaurant is more beloved than Josy-Jo. Occupying a stone house where Modigliani once lived, the restaurant serves top-notch Provençal cuisine that belies its humble origins. Though the Nice-raised chef Josy Bandecchi has shared the spotlight as a television guest of the superchef Joël Robuchon, she learned to cook by watching her mother prepare Sunday dinners. "I try to recapture the flavors of my childhood," she said of her deceptively simple cooking style on a sunny afternoon, as her own daughter took dinner reservations. "No one has to explain each dish to you. You taste it and you know immediately what it is."

Indeed, the menu is as simple and restrained as the white plaster walls and exposed timber beams of the dining room. You might find grilled peppers soaked in olive oil — giving them a melting, lozengelike suppleness — or vegetables stuffed "grandmother's style" with diced lamb, garlic, parsley and tomato sauce. The thick-cut rack of lamb is hearty enough for a Visigoth and tender enough for a teething child. There's nothing flashy, nothing superfluous.

"I was never very à la mode," she said, sounding like the spokeswoman for the Côte d'Obscure. "And I never wanted to be."

VISITOR INFORMATION

VILLEFRANCHE-SUR-MER

Hôtel Welcome, 3, quai Amiral Courbet, (33-4) 93-76-27-62; www.welcomehotel.com. Jean Cocteau's favorite hotel and an excellent portside location. High-season doubles from 142 euros (about \$182 at \$1.28 to the euro); from 91 euros in low season.

La Mère Germaine, Quai Corbet, (33-4) 93-01-71-39. Fresh-caught seafood, including classic bouillabaisse. Three-course dinner for two about 100 euros.

Chappelle de St.-Pierre, Quai de la Douane, (33-4) 93-76-90-70. Admission 2 euros.

EZE

L'Arc en Ciel, Avenue du Jardin Exotique, (33-4) 93-41-02-66; www.arcenciezeze.fr. Pleasant six-room hotel with an adjoining souvenir shop and a snack bar. Doubles from 69 euros; 62 in low season.

Le Grill du Château, Rue du Barri, (33-4) 92-10-66-66; www.chevredor.com. Though considered the less-fancy restaurant at the extravagant Chevre d'Or hotel (which also contains a highly luxurious and expensive dining room with two Michelin stars), it has a panoramic view and French-Mediterranean cuisine that are impressive in their own right. A three-course dinner for two

is about 120 euros. Hotel doubles from 270 euros.

CAGNES

Hotel Le Grimaldi, 6 Place du Chateau; (33-4) 93-20-60-24; www.hotelgrimaldi.com. Rustic-chic rooms on the café-lined main square. Doubles from 125 euros (115 in low season), breakfast included.

Le Cagnard, 1, rue Pontis Long, (33-4) 93-20-73-21. Michelin-starred restaurant in a 13th-century building overlooking the sea. Multicourse dinner menus at 72 and 95 euros a person.

Josy-Jo, 2, rue du Planastel, (33-4) 93-20-68-76: Down-home, top-notch Provençal cuisine from the veteran chef Josy Bandecchi. A 40 euro lunch menu; dinner is à la carte around 60 euros a person.

Musée Renoir, Chemin des Collettes, (33-4) 93-20-61-07; 3 euros admission.

GETTING AROUND

International flights to Nice provide the best access to Cagnes, Eze and Villefranche. From Nice, you can reach the towns by rental car (in summer, coastal roads are traffic-choked and parking is scarce) or by public bus. The No. 100 bus (1.30 euros a ride) links Nice's bus station with Villefranche and with Eze, both to the east. From the coastal bus stop in Eze, take the hourly shuttle to Eze-Village, the medieval village perched in the hills. Alternatively, buses 82 and 112 go directly from Nice to the upper village. To reach Haut-de-Cagnes, head westward on the number 200 bus (1.30 euros) from Nice's bus station. From Cagnes-sur-Mer, the modern center of the town, take the free shuttle marked "Haut-de-Cagnes" to the last stop, which will deposit you next to the Château Grimaldi.

Correction: Aug. 6, 2006

An article last Sunday about the French Riviera misstated the number of years ago that the Rolling Stones lived in Villefranche-sur-Mer and worked on the "Exile on Main Street" album. It was 35 years, not 25.

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