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St.-Tropez à Go-Go

By SETH SHERWOOD

JUNE had barely begun, but the legendary French Riviera celebrity bastion of St.-Tropez already had its first scandale of the summer. All across the seaside village, fresh piles of the June 10 issue of *La Tribune de St.-Tropez* declared the breaking news. From socialites shopping in the Rodeo Drive-like stores along Rue François Sibilli to the jet-setting playboys and billionaires trawling the coconut-oil-scented fleshpots along Mediterranean beaches, the summer crowd that arrives early suddenly found a disturbing front-page discovery that would once have been unthinkable.

"This just in," the article announced, accompanied by snapshots of Mary-Kate Olsen, Naomi Campbell and Bono disguised in an array of hats and sunglasses at various St.-Tropez locations. "Stars are now coming to St.-Tropez simply to vacation, and are opting to go out incognito."

For an instant, everything St.-Tropez stood for seemed to be called into question. But before the consummate see-and-be-seen party haven could fully contemplate the inconceivable dimming of its wattage, hope sprang a few days later from the sea. As incognito as a monster truck arriving at the White House, the 160-foot power yacht *Passion* cruised into St.-Tropez's old port, navigated its bulk past the rustic ocher buildings lining the harbor and settled directly before the busy dockside cafes. Tanned, jewelry-bedecked women stared from behind Chanel sunglasses while tourists snapped pictures of an American hip-hop titan and his girlfriend, an immediately recognizable R & B singer in shorts and high heels, descending the gangway. As the pair got into a waiting minivan, the man flashed the victory sign to bedazzled onlookers.

"Excuse me," said a balding middle-aged traveler with an Australian accent and Bermuda shorts as he tapped a fellow gawker. "But was that Jay-Z and Beyoncé?"

This just in: Don't look for St.-Tropez in the obituaries anytime soon.

Summer after summer, year after year, the former Roman colony whose name has become a byword for sun-soaked shores and Champagne-soaked revelry swells with the pleasure seekers, the rich, the superrich and the flesh-and-blood incarnations of characters usually seen on magazine covers and shareholder reports.

The ritual is as regular and irrepressible as the Côte d'Azur tides themselves: the yachts barrel in, the Ferraris roll up, the paparazzi take up position, the vacationers gape and wave. Between the Rolex Cup sailing races in June and the Porsche parade in fall, St.-Tropez, a provincial maritime village of

about 5,500, expands tenfold, becoming a traffic-choked pageant where one finds, to quote the French daily newspaper Figaro, "the greatest number of famous faces per square meter." For V.I.P.'s, would-be V.I.P.'s and regular weekenders alike, the attractions are the same: charming old streets, a Dionysian beach scene and perhaps the most decadent nightclubs in the world.

"It's always beautiful, it's always solid, and yachts always need somewhere to go," says Lee Harrington, a New York writer who has visited the resort several times and will summer there again this August. "As people get richer, as the world turns, the place just seems to get more 'St.-Tropez.' "

"Non, non, non, non, non," says Bernard Kerob, a longtime provider of helicopter shuttle service to St.-Tropez- whose clients have ranged from splurging families to Julia Roberts - when asked if he has ever witnessed a decline in the popularity of his town among the high-season masses. "Never." Sitting Buddhalike behind his desk, arms folded over his middle-age paunch, Mr. Kerob offers a nugget to explain St.-Tropez's apparently unflagging appeal to all income brackets: "It's mythic," he says, as though expressing a universally accepted axiom. "St.-Tropez is mythic."

Fittingly, that myth began with a celebrity on a ship. When in the 1880's the writer Guy de Maupassant tacked his sailboat Bel-Ami into a largely isolated fishing community, he found a charming hamlet that he described in his 1888 memoir "Sur l'Eau" ("On the Water") as looking "like a seashell wet by the salt water and nourished by fish and the sea air."

Soon, the masses followed. The neo-Impressionist painter Paul Signac sailed into port in 1892 aboard his yacht Olympia and invited Henri Matisse and other painters to capture the rapturous Mediterranean color and light. The end of World War II brought Parisian writers - Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Jacques Prévert - who created a summertime Left Bank at the portside Sénéquier and Gorille cafes.

But it was the body of the young Brigitte Bardot - she's still a resident of the town, though rarely seen - rolling in the St.-Tropez surf in the 1956 film "And God Created Woman" that, almost by fiat, gave birth to the sultry playground of the emerging jet-set age. By the time Mick and Bianca Jagger tied the knot at the Chapel of St.-Anne in 1971, the place's notorious indulgences had cemented its reputation as St. Trop: St. Too Much, in French. Today, Maupassant's Tropezien village, his "simple daughter of the sea," is a bikini babe with a 24-hour partying streak and an entourage that routinely includes Naomi Campbell, Bruce Willis, Ivana Trump, Denise Rich, P. Diddy, Rupert Everett and scores of other boldface names.

On a sweltering afternoon in mid-June, three Eastern European daughters of the sea - well, the sea of short skirts and forbiddingly large, black sunglasses - are carrying the St.-Trop flag. Looking like the unlikely offspring of Zsa Zsa Gabor and Darth Vader, the trio grinds to club music next to a crowded outdoor pool by the beach. All around are UV-soaked men and topless women, their skin as oily and brown as freshly unwrapped Slim Jims, who lie sprawled like lotus eaters on billowing white canopy beds and mattresses. White-clad waiters rush about with water-beaded buckets of Champagne as a

blonde in a white bikini begins to do acrobatic contortions, much to onlookers' delight.

It's business as usual at Nikki Beach, one of the 30-odd beaches on the Bay of Pampelonne, a three-mile stretch of sand that forms the mythic epicenter of the Riviera. In a land where each beach has its own vibe and clientele - Liberty is for nudists, Coco is popular with gays, ritzy Club 55 feels like a Beverly Hills country club - Nikki Beach (which also has clubs in Marbella, Miami, St. Bart's and elsewhere) styles itself as a nightclub in broad daylight. The gimmick seems to be working. Extravagant partyers, self-styled big-shots, scantily clad sirens and various entertainment stars (real and imagined) seem only too happy to kick off their round-the-clock bacchanal under the noonday sun.

Like a Roman emperor in his harem, a sandy-haired Dutch-born casino operator named Arno Van Dorst sits barefoot in jeans and a pink Izod shirt on a huge white floor cushion, basking in the afternoon rays with a chilled bottle of Moët & Chandon. About 10 feet away, a magazine photographer slowly circles a trio of lithe, dark-haired beauties lying seductively intertwined. Mr. Van Dorst has been on the Riviera since driving his Porsche Cayenne down from his base in Warsaw a few weeks earlier, but it's his first time at Nikki Beach.

"It's fantastic, it's wonderful," he says, as the three divas - his wife, sister-in-law and niece - giggle and pose. He hands a glass of Champagne to his friend, Jeroen, a swarthy Dutchman who charters his 1930's sailboat for \$22,000 a week (at \$1.23 to the euro) from his home in Cannes.

For hedonism, Nikki Beach's only serious competitor is La Voile Rouge, a beach club famed for Champagne-spraying free-for-alls that make most World Series celebrations look like a kiddie party at Chuck E. Cheese's. Anecdotes are legion about rich industrialists buying bottles and bottles of Dom Pérignon (\$1,350) that ultimately wind up in the hair of near-naked young women and other beachgoers. To judge from the menu, which is covered in photos of the club's late owner, Paul Tomaselli, madly firing bottles of bubbly, as well as pictures of celebrity clients like Sly Stallone - one could wring out the mops at day's end and produce enough sparkling wine to inebriate a battleship full of promgoers.

But on this particular afternoon, to the chagrin of some, there is no booze bath. In spite of loud music, a "fashion show" - a parade of robust girls in skimpy beachwear - and a steady stream of well-heeled internationals arriving on tenders from huge ships bobbing offshore, the scene never quite reaches its fabled boiling point. No matter. As dark helicopters deliver V.I.P.'s to oceanside landing pads, clients and staff members sit at umbrella tables and offer tales of abandon either lived or witnessed.

"Last summer I got knocked out," says the D.J., a New York transplant called M. C. Spade, explaining that the volley of corks requires that employees don football helmets and firemen's hats when the blasting begins. "A guy opened a bottle and BOOM! I was bleeding."

A German businessman chatting with him is not surprised. "One afternoon I was here and some guys

spent 150,000 euros on Champagne," says Tilo Kuhnke, who runs a "bungee trampoline" company, shaking his head in disbelief. "I was there when the bill arrived. There were bathtubs full of huge bottles. It was incredible." His date is eager for the action to kick in. "I had heard this place was crazy, with lots of Champagne and girls," says the disappointed white-blond woman ("Barbie, like the doll") as she drinks a Coke at the outdoor bar. She nods disapprovingly at the bartenders who are women. "Everyone here has silicone."

As the third weekend in June arrives, the town is awash in its mythology, past and present. At the 17th-century citadel overlooking the town a soiree pays tribute to Françoise Sagan, author of "Bonjour Tristesse" and a former habitué of St.-Tropez who died last year. On the opposite flank of the harbor, the Annonciade museum is opening its 50th season with "Éclats du Fauvism," a retrospective of works by Matisse, Dufy, André Derain and other painters who found in St.-Tropez the inspiration for their electric, groundbreaking experiments in color. Between the two, the ubiquitous tooth-white yacht of Jay-Z and Beyoncé sits moored against the quay, nestled between equally gargantuan cruisers with names like One More Toy.

Night descends in a flaming pink sunset, and the sounds of boat horns and sea gulls mix with the chainsaw buzz of dolled-up girls on scooters zipping off to cocktail lounges and parties. Somehow they can flawlessly navigate in high heels, tight dresses and bulbous safety helmets over manes of hair. Fresh from postbeach showers, Italian families, German couples and loads of St.-Tropez summer residents clad in white linen crowd the harborside tables at Café Sénéquier. Together they participate in a twilight summer ritual: sipping rosé or pastis while scoping the moored ships to see who might step off.

For diners interested in seafood, the hot table is the new portside restaurant L'Escale, one of the few places you can still see Ms. Bardot (in the form of huge photos from the 1960's). For those interested in eye candy, there's the even hotter Villa Romana, a sort of Playboy Mansion with risotto. It's the type of place whose print ads trumpet the names of stars who eat there - Swedish royalty, George Clooney, Vin Diesel - without one word about the cuisine.

In an overdecorated bachelor-pad environment of leopard-print cushions and gilt columns, I watch as crowds of aspiring Hugh Hefners and their female entourages ogle a procession of suspiciously buxom models in skin-tight outfits - another St.-Tropez "fashion show" - who strut around to pop and techno music. The D.J. selects "You're Sixteen (You're Beautiful and You're Mine)" while an M.C. in pirate regalia works the excited crowd of preclubbers, chatting up some faux-blond ladies and outfitting them with huge hats saying things like "Bad Girl."

My waiter informs me that tonight is, well, "kind of slow."

Where partying is concerned, St.-Tropez has set the bar in the stratosphere. A week earlier, the week that produced the staggering pronouncements of La Tribune de St.-Tropez, the mythic night life scene was "tranquil," as one club manager told me. In other words, the clubs were completely crazy

with Champagne and dancing until 5 a.m., but no top-flight stars joined the fray. At Papagayo, a portside dance club where Bruce Willis, Bono and P. Diddy like to stop in, the void of boldface names had been quickly filled by three gilded youths who commandeered the V.I.P. area and began drinking Cristal through straws as they and their dates danced around a stripper's pole.

"This was me last night," said a floppy-haired German business student named Kaspar, proudly showing a cellphone photo of himself comatose under empty Cristal bottles. He estimated the evening would cost his trio a thousand euros, well down from the 3,000 they were spending nightly in 2004. "Global economic downturn," he explained.

On this Saturday night, however, macroeconomic concerns wind up doing little to dampen the head-spinning outlays at Les Caves du Roy, St.-Tropez's premier den of iniquity for conspicuous consumers on eight-figure salaries.

"Ladies and gentlemen. White Gold!" shouts the D.J., a balding, 40-ish mountain of a man named Jack E., whose booth beams with photos of him mugging with Magic Johnson, Jack Nicholson and Donatella Versace. The dense crowd of what the French call "les beautiful people" erupts in cheers at the much-hoped-for moment.

Under the flash of electric palm trees and giant mirror balls that have graced the Las Vegas casinolike club since its inception in the 1970's, a waiter crosses the carpet with a silver ice bucket shooting off sparks. As it's delivered to an unseen client in the overcrowded V.I.P. area, an ocean of bodies with D & G belt buckles and hockey-puck-size watches pauses to behold the breathtaking event: Someone has decided not to let some petty economic downturn stop him from shelling out nearly \$15,000 on a limited-edition bottle of 1995 Dom Pérignon, which indeed comes clad in white-gold wrapping.

The crowd hoists \$30 bottles of Corona beer and modest \$320 bottles of Veuve Clicquot in boisterous salute. On the dance floor, a tiny gyrating woman sports a white T-shirt with a message that could be St.-Tropez's motto: Luxe Is Not Dead.

Then, in the mayhem, a much-photographed British tabloid duo plants itself behind a center table. The woman, a sexy brunette from a once-mighty pop group, grabs a fat cigar from the mouth of her husband, a soccer god, and begins to gyrate ostentatiously and swing her fist to AC/DC's "Highway to Hell" as she puffs the orange-glowing log. Stoli and Coke are brought to the table. Throngs of admirers press together for a glimpse.

"Good evening, Mr. and Mrs. Beckham," Jack E. says cheekily into his microphone, ending any charade of their remaining incognito as gapers and glad-handers surround the pair.

"And good morning, St.-Tropez!"

VISITOR INFORMATION

GETTING THERE

Nice (about 60 miles away) has the nearest international airport to St.-Tropez. In mid-July Delta Airlines had nonstop flights to Nice in mid-August from Kennedy International Airport in New York from \$1,029. Delta one-stop flights (with a change in Paris) started at \$949, and numerous other airlines offered flights from New York with a change of plane.

Getting from Nice to St.-Tropez, however, can be a chore, as there is no train service, no direct bus and nightmarish summer traffic that can turn the trip into a four-hour crawl by car. The quickest, and priciest, route between Nice and St.-Tropez is by helicopter. **Heli Air Monaco**, (377) 92.050.050, www.heliairmonaco.com, does the 20-minute flight from the Nice airport for up to five people for \$924; prices at \$1.23 to the euro. The slowest, and cheapest, option is to take **Beltrame** bus line, (33-4) 94.95.95.16, www.sva-beltrame.com, to San Rafael (\$20), and then catch a Sode trav bus, (33-8) 25.00.06.50, www.sode trav.fr, to St.-Tropez (\$11). A taxi from Nice to St.-Tropez runs about \$320. Try **Centrale Taxi Riviera**, (33-4) 93.13.78.78.

GETTING AROUND

The village of St.-Tropez is small, concentrated and pedestrian-friendly, so summer travelers should avoid adding yet another car to the vehicle-packed streets. If you forgo an automobile, you can use a motor scooter to reach the beaches on the Bay of Pampelonne and other spots outside St.-Tropez proper. **Holiday Bikes**, (33-4) 94-97-09-39, www.holiday-bikes.com, rents basic scooters for two people (along with helmets) from \$271 a week.

WHERE TO STAY

Room rates are for high season and are based on double occupancy.

Hôtel Sube, 15, quai de Suffren; (33-4) 94.97.30.04; www.hotel-sube.com. St.-Tropez's oldest hotel is in the heart of the port and contains a popular nautical-themed bar with excellent harbor views. Rooms from \$172.

Hôtel des Lices, Avenue Grangeon, (33-4) 94.97.28.28; www.hoteldeslices.com. Steps from St.-Tropez's central square, the Place des Lices, the hotel has a lovely pool and a pleasant, underused bar. From \$176.

La Maison Blanche, Places des Lices; (33-4) 94.97.52.66; www.hotellamaisonblanche.com. An intimate boutique hotel with stylish modern design (lots of right angles and white surfaces, as per the name) and popular preclubbing patio bar. From \$272.

Hôtel Byblos, Avenue Paul Signac; (33-4) 94.56.68.00; www.byblos.com. The most famous hotel in town, the hillside Byblos is decorated to resemble a Provençal village, complete with yellow and pink rustic-looking buildings and flowery fabrics in the rooms. The Spoon restaurant and Caves du Roy

nightclub, both hot spots, are on the premises. From \$615.

WHERE TO EAT

Villa Romana, Chemin des Conquettes; (33-4) 94.97.15.50; www.villa-romana.com. The Italian cooking is just above average, but the gaudy Playboy Mansion vibe and "fashion show" of scantily clad women draws celebrities, tycoons and would-be tycoons by the yachtful. Two can have a three-course meal, without wine, for around \$150.

L'Escale, 9, quai Jean Jaurès; (33-4) 94.97.00.63. A stylish, newly opened seafood restaurant that's already one of the hottest tables in town. The sand floor and Brigitte Bardot photos pay homage to St.-Tropez's big draws, and the huge grilled Mediterranean prawns eat like beefsteaks of the sea. Dinner for two, without wine, runs about \$185.

Spoon Byblos, Avenue du Maréchal Foch; (33-4) 94.56.68.20. Operated by the international celebrity chef Alain Ducasse, this slick indoor-outdoor restaurant does a clever pastiche of international dishes, from ceviche to shrimp ravioli to Moroccan tagines. Two people can eat three courses for around \$160, without wine.

Café des Arts, 1, place Carnot, (33-4) 94.97.02.25. With a zinc bar, chalkboard menu and view of the locals playing boules, this institution offers a classic French bistro feel. Marinated anchovies (\$11) followed by grilled entrecôte with fries (\$23) make an affordable and authentic French meal.

La Tarte Tropézienne, Place des Lices; (33-4) 94.97.04.69. A good, low-cost breakfast and lunch option selling chocolate croissants (\$1.20), pizzalike fougasse (\$4.50) and assorted sandwiches (\$5; \$6 to go).

WHERE TO SUNBATHE

While the peninsula on which St.-Tropez is located holds numerous free, public stretches of sand, it's the 30-plus private beach clubs along the Bay of Pampelonne (a few miles outside St.-Tropez proper, in Ramatuelle) that radiate from most postcards and supermarket gossip sheets. For an admission fee (generally \$12 to \$24), visitors get a long, cushioned chair on the crowded sand. Most clubs have a bar, restaurant and other amenities. Each has a distinct personality and clientele.

Nikki Beach, Route de l'Epi; (33-4) 94.79.82.04. Youthful Champagne-fueled decadence on white canopy beds around a swimming pool.

La Voile Rouge, Route des Tamaris; (33-4) 94.79.84.34. More of the same, though without the pool, for a slightly older and even more moneyed set.

Millesim, Route de Tahiti; (33-4) 94.97.20.99. Buddha statues, Tiki bar and ayurvedic massage make this a nice, Far-Eastern-style antidote to the more hedonistic beaches.

Club 55, Boulevard Patch; (33-4) 94.55.55.55. refined, sedate country-club-like St.-Tropez institution with plenty of celebrity patrons and moneyed families, as well as regular folks.

Key West, Boulevard Patch; (33-4) 94.79.86.58. A local favorite for its relaxed vibe and family-friendly environment, complete with backgammon tables.

Plage de Bouillabaisse is a free, public beach on the west side of the village of St.-Tropez.

WHERE TO DANCE

There's no cover at most St.-Tropez clubs, but that doesn't mean getting in is easy: long lines and selective door policies (i.e., be a woman or have some with you) mean it's best to arrive early. And once you're in, drink prices are stratospheric. Clubs are generally open from 11 p.m. to 5 a.m.

Les Caves du Roy, Hotel Byblos, entrance on Avenue du Maréchal Foch; (33-4) 94.56.68.20.

VIP Room, Résidence du Nouveau Port; (33-4) 94.97.14.70.

Papagayo, Résidence du Nouveau Port; (33-4) 94.97.07.56.

WHERE TO SHOP

Is there a St.-Tropez look? "Make sure you have some cool sunglasses and one good handbag and one great pair of shoes," offers Lee Harrington, a frequent visitor. "And some cleavage." At least three of those things can be purchased along the premier luxury shopping streets in St.-Tropez, Rue Gambetta (Dior, Kenzo) and Rue François Sibilli (Roberto Cavalli, Dolce & Gabbana, Louis Vuitton). To go incognito, score a man's or woman's Panama hat from Véritable Panama, 5, place des Ramparts, and grab some designer shades at Solaris, 10, rue du Général Allard.

SIGHTSEEING

Citadel, Montée de la Citadelle; (33-4) 94.97.59.43. Built under Henri IV in the early 1600's, this four-towered, high-walled fortress offers a commanding view of the region. Its naval museum is closed until 2007. Admission \$6.

Musée de l'Annonciade, Place Grammont, Vieux Port; (33-4) 94.17.84.10. The museum celebrates its 50th anniversary with "Éclats du Fauvism" (through Oct. 17), a retrospective of Matisse, Braque, Dufy, Derain and other painters who pioneered the colorful Fauvist movement. Admission \$6.75.

Le Brigantin, Quai Suffren in the Vieux Port; (33-6) 07.09.21.27. This sightseeing boat offers multiple daily trips along the lovely St.-Tropez coast with commentary in French and English.

SETH SHERWOOD, a frequent contributor to the Travel section, last wrote about Dubai.

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