

# TOWN&COUNTRY

“The Secret of South France”

## TRAVELER'S NOTEBOOK

### The Secret South of France

No wonder artists have escaped to the Côte d'Azur since the late 19th century: the French Riviera is full of inspiring surprises, even for those who know it well.

By Lanie Goodman

The dazzling coastline near Nice, the heart of the Côte d'Azur.

BACK IN THE 1880s, when Renoir and Monet set out together to paint the mauve foothills, feathery palm groves and cobalt-blue sea of the Côte d'Azur, they knew they were on to something. But even they probably didn't imagine that the Riviera would become a hotbed of artistic creativity and the epitome of the good life. For more than a century now, travelers from all walks have been stopping along this untamed coast to create their own private paradise, drawn by the remarkable light and the enchantment of a gentle Mediterranean lifestyle. Picasso, Matisse, Bonnard, Léger and Chagall couldn't leave once they got a taste of the riotous array of pure colors, and twenty years after arriving here, I myself have yet to find a reason to move back to the States.

In my time, much has changed—politics, prices—but the most radical transformation has been in the cityscapes. Nice now has fourteen ultramodern large-scale artworks to go with its shiny new tram, all of

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which have helped turn France's fifth-biggest city into a sprawling outdoor museum. And within a few years, with the opening of a foundation headed by Jean Nouvel, Nice will become a major international research center for architecture. The nearby towns of Menton, Antibes, Cannes, Vence, Grasse, Le Cannet and St.-Jean-Cap-Ferrat also have lots of excitement: new galleries, concept stores, restaurants and museums, many of which somehow fly under the radar for visitors.

"Living well is the best revenge," said the American expat and artist Gerald Murphy, who invented the art of living on the Côte d'Azur in the 1920s. Things aren't quite the same as they were when Murphy first stumbled into the once-quiet Hôtel du Cap, on Cap d'Antibes, but living well is still an art—and an evolving one, at that—in these parts. Here are a few of my favorite secret addresses (listed by category) that reflect the recent reinvention of art, style and food on the shimmering Côte d'Azur.

### DESIGNS FOR LIVING

The south of France claims numerous outstanding and widely known museums, but few people realize how many groundbreaking modern architects and designers called the Riviera home. One of France's most impressive collections of 1920s and '30s Art Deco furniture is hidden away in a medieval village near Grasse. The **Musée des Arts Décoratifs et de l'Art Moderne** (*Château de Gourdon; 011-33-4-93-09-68-02; chateau-gourdon.com*) sits at the top of the cobblestoned streets of Gourdon in a 12th-century castle. Inside are more than 1,000 pieces by designers as diverse as Pierre Chareau, Robert Mallet-Stevens, Francis Jourdain, Betty Joel and Louis Majorelle (whose walnut Art Nouveau water-lily suite, with a dreamy sunken bath, is a stunner).



The 12th-century  
Château de Gourdon

Another little-known cache: Le Corbusier's and Irish Deco designer Eileen Gray's dual landmarks on the lush peninsula of Roquebrune-Cap-Martin. Open for visits by appointment only, Corbu's 1952 beach "castle," **Le Cabanon Le Corbusier** (*Sentier Massolin; 011-33-4-93-35-62-87*), is a tiny 144-square-foot cabin containing only a bed, two cube chairs, a sink, a pivoting table and a desk. But the space is livened up by the architect's colorful wall paintings.

Gray actually found this glorious spot (chirping cicadas, yuccas, lemon and carob trees, pink oleanders) first, in 1926. After years of abandonment, decay and administrative battles, her **Villa E1027**, which occupies a corner of the same plot of land, has finally been restored. The austere concrete house on stilts, slated for inauguration next year, promises to highlight a mix of originals and one-off replicas of Gray's bold-patterned rugs as well as her innovative modular furnishings.

Heading east down the coast to Menton, you'll find the **Musée Jean Cocteau** (*Bastion du Vieux Port; 011-33-4-93-57-72-30*), a 17th-century stone bastion at the water's edge. The house displays examples of Cocteau's vast artistic output—beach-pebble mosaics, wall frescoes, ceramics and oils—and gives visitors a peek at some of the canvases from the newly acquired Cocteau collection that had belonged to watch mogul Severin Wunderman.