

Europe

Secret south of France — where the Parisians go

Forget overpriced Cannes and Nice and head to these small towns and beaches the French keep to themselves, says **Tristan Rutherford**

Agay

Only 18 miles (30km) from Cannes, Agay could be from another century. It's a simple swoosh of golden sand where Guy de Maupassant and Antoine de Saint-Exupéry came to write and where Parisians escape to eat *en famille* and camp by the sea. Agay is slap-bang in the Massif de l'Estérel natural reserve; we're talking nearly 80,000 acres of volcanic red mountains and raggedy-jagged virgin coast. Book a self-guided family bike tour (ebike-vasion.fr) or reserve a sea kayak (agay.fr).

Where to stay

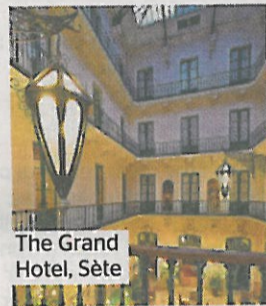
French families come here for the brilliant beachside campsites. Agay Soleil (00 33 4 94 82 00 79, agay-soleil.com) has tent pitches from £17 a night for two and sea access, with boats, kayaks and bikes to rent. Posher still are its four-person wooden chalets, from £315 a week, that come with a tiny sun terrace. The three guestrooms at Villa Mélodie (00 33 4 94 82 06 65, villa-melodie.com), where B&B doubles cost from £80 a night, are fronted by a tiny sandy cove, a two-minute drive from the beach at Agay.

Aigues-Mortes

Aigues-Mortes rises from the Camargue wetlands like a Disney castle. Pink flamingos parade outside the medieval ramparts. Take a 90-minute self-guided tour of the city walls (£6). Salt pans glow crimson in the distance as blue canals flow on to Sète and the River Rhône. Another waterway runs to the seaside a short bike ride, boat ride or paddle away (croisieres-camargue.com; kayakvert-camargue.fr). The shoreline is spectacular: 11 miles of sandy beach where egrets and herons outnumber Brits.

Where to stay

For the most memorable sojourn, stay within Aigues-Mortes' medieval ramparts. Amid the old town's pavement cafés and market stalls sits Hermitage de Saint-Antoine (00 33 6 03 04 34 05, hermitagesa.com) with B&B doubles from £67. Hotel Les Templiers (00 33 4 66 53 66 56), with doubles from £79 a night, is similarly gorgeous. It has original stone floors, club chairs



The Grand Hotel, Sète

Need to know

British Airways (0344 4930787, ba.com/nice) flies from Heathrow and Gatwick to Nice from £96 return. EasyJet (0330 3655000, easyjet.com) flies to Nice from eight UK airports from £79 one-way. SNCF (voyages-sncf.com) runs trains from London to Nice, with a quick change in Paris, from £121 return.

Roquebrune-Cap-Martin



and candles inside, and café tables under a pink pepper tree outdoors.

La Ciotat

The Lumière brothers screened the first moving picture in La Ciotat's super-cute (and recently reopened) cinema. Films aside, this pretty working port is all about the sea. Munch black urchins, red mullet and lobster straight from the fishing boats at any quayside restaurant. Or take the shuttle boat for a snorkel safari to the uninhabited Ile Verte, a mile or so from shore. Boat tours run from the port to the new Calanques National Park (visite-calanques.fr). La Ciotat has its own cavernous creek and the Calanque de Figuerolles has a swim-to island.

Where to stay

La Ciotat's age-old streets are stacked with cute B&Bs. The hosts, Valerie and Guy, are a mine of information and make Le Rayon Vert (00 33 4 42 83 26 22, booking.com) the town's top pick, with B&B doubles from £64. La Maison d'Odette (00 33 6 31 14 21 73, lamaisondodette.fr) has doubles from £68 a night and blends traditional *tomette* (tile) floors and antique dressers with hip Provençal linens and modernist lighting. Odette's £4 breakfast is served at the cutesy café across the street.

Cap d'Ail

The *belle époque* villas and coastal trails of Cap d'Ail were built a century ago by Monaco's casino industry to attract gamers to its baccarat tables two miles away. The gamble backfired because famous faces such as Winston Churchill and Grace Kelly simply used the French border town as an escape from the principality's hoi polloi. Such glamour is



La Ciotat harbour

charted in the Villa les Camélias history museum (villalescamelias.com).

Nowadays Cap d'Ail has the ultimate secret seaside stretch: the two chic beach clubs of Plage de la Mala can be reached only by 200 oleander-choked steps. The two-mile "back door" path into Monaco is still open. It passes half a dozen beachy coves en route.

Where to stay

Given its wondrous location, Cap d'Ail is blessed with fabulously well-priced accommodation. Pound for pound, the Cote d'Azur's best address is Villa Thalassa, a hostel in a billionaire's seafront mansion (00 33 4 93 81 27 63, clajud.fr), with B&B doubles from £30 a night. A five-minute walk up the road, Hotel de Monaco (00 33 4 92 41 31 00, hoteldemonaco.com) is a refined boutique option, with doubles from £96.

Giens

Originally an island, Giens' beaches built up over thousands of years to form a corridor to the mainland near Hyères, about two miles away. Prevailing winds render the westerly beach, Plage de l'Almanarre, a haven for windsurfers and kiteboarders. The easterly beach, Plage de la Capte, is silky, sandy and sheltered. The salt pans in the middle are an unrefined Eden replete with flamingos, herons and sea daffodils. Giens itself has the charm of a ritzy Breton port where moneyed Parisians (with Agnès B jumpers knotted around their shoulders) scoff locally caught oysters. An hourly ferry hops from Giens to the Porquerolles island (tlv-tvm.com) 20 minutes away.

Where to stay

Another of southern France's magnificent campsites, Camping la Presqu'île de Giens (00 33 49458 2286, camping-giens.com) offers scuba diving, sea kayaking, and Zumba, plus luxurious wooden chalets close to the beach from £250 a week for a cabin for four. Hotel Provençal (00 33 4 98 04 54 54, provençalhotel.com) is a super-smart hotel with a seaside

swimming pool, plus rental properties within the five-acre gardens. Doubles are from £93.

Rayol-Canadel

Rayol-Canadel was popularised by the Provence railway. Now disused, those same tracks double as a path that loops above the area's star attraction: the blow-out beaches of Rayol, Canadel, Pramouquier and Figuiér. Rayol-Canadel's microclimate also nurtures what are arguably the finest gardens in southern France. Le Domaine du Rayol (domainedurayol.org) is a mini Kew that tumbles seaward over 50 acres of sun-blessed diversity. Best of all is the Domaine's private beach. Here a snorkel trail takes in oysters, rainbow wrasse, octopus and starfish.

Where to stay

Hip B&Bs slip easily into Rayol-Canadel's mountain-meets-beach topography. The four vast guest rooms of Villa du Plageron (00 33 4 94 05 61 15, plageron.com) sit in what could be an extension of the Domaine du Rayol's tropical gardens and cost from £120 B&B. There's direct toes-in-the-water access too. Above nearby Plage Cavalière, Villa Castelmau (00 33 4 94 22 10 73, villapleinsud.fr) combines fancy Frenchified rooms with a seaview breakfast terrace from £88 B&B. It also manages a four-person studio apartment 50m from the beach.

Roquebrune-Cap-Martin

Roquebrune-Cap-Martin dangles a full 225m (750ft) above the Mediterranean between Monaco and the Italian border. There are two routes from the medieval village down to the cracking public beaches of Plage du Buse and Plage du Golfe Bleu. Hike through orange groves or parascend gently to the sand for £56 (parapente-roquebrune.fr). Don't worry, the No21 bus runs back to the top.



Roquebrune-Cap-Martin's other big attraction is the recently reopened seaside villas of Le Corbusier and his unrequited love, Eileen Gray (capmoderne.com).

Where to stay

Midway between the medieval village and beach, Le Roquebrune (00 33 4 93 35 00 16, le-roquebrune.com) has six vintage-chic guest rooms with panoramic sea views from £88 a night. A short walk from the reopened Le Corbusier villas, the 32 rooms at the Hotel Victoria (00 33 4 93 35 65 90, hotel-victoria.fr) are themed in homage to Riviera artists including Matisse and Picasso and cost from £73.50 a night.

Six-Fours-les-Plages

Rare is the Brit who has heard of Six-Fours; this southern enclave is French-only territory. Yet this sunbaked resort (it's on the same latitude as Corsica) boasts swim-to islands, 11 miles of beach-creek coastline and inland treetop trails (janasaventure.com). You can walk or swim to the first two offshore islands. Both the Iles des Gaou are ringed with coves and shaded by Aleppo pines — and are cleared of tourists at 9pm to keep things pristine. Ile des Embiez (les-embiez.com) takes a full two hours to traverse on foot. Thanks to the former island owner, the pastis magnate Paul Ricard, vineyards ripple down to its seven sandy beaches. It's so sunny that grapes are harvested in the August haze.



Hotel Victoria in Roquebrune-Cap-Martin

You'll need a kayak to reach the tiny Iles des Magnons, even farther out to sea.

Where to stay

The simple campsite Orly d'Azur (00 33 4 94 25 59 41, camping-orly.fr) lets out oh-so-cute wooden chalets from £223 a week for four. It also organises scuba courses and vineyard hikes. Stay on Ile des Embiez and you'll have the island's seven beaches almost to yourself each evening. The luxury island hotspot Hotel Hélios (00 33 4 94 74 67 46, helios-embiez.com) has tennis courts, swimming pools and nature trails, with B&B doubles from £121 a night, and lets out 150 apartments.

Sète

Just east of Marseilles, Sète is known as the Venice of Languedoc as canals course through the town. Most alluringly, the local fishing fleet offloads its catch quayside, ensuring bargain platters of famed local oysters at almost every harbour bar. Local colour comes to the

fore during August's water jousting competition — think men with wooden lances on beefed-up gondolas. Sète's lido and endless dunes encompass seven miles of sandy sea shore.

Where to stay

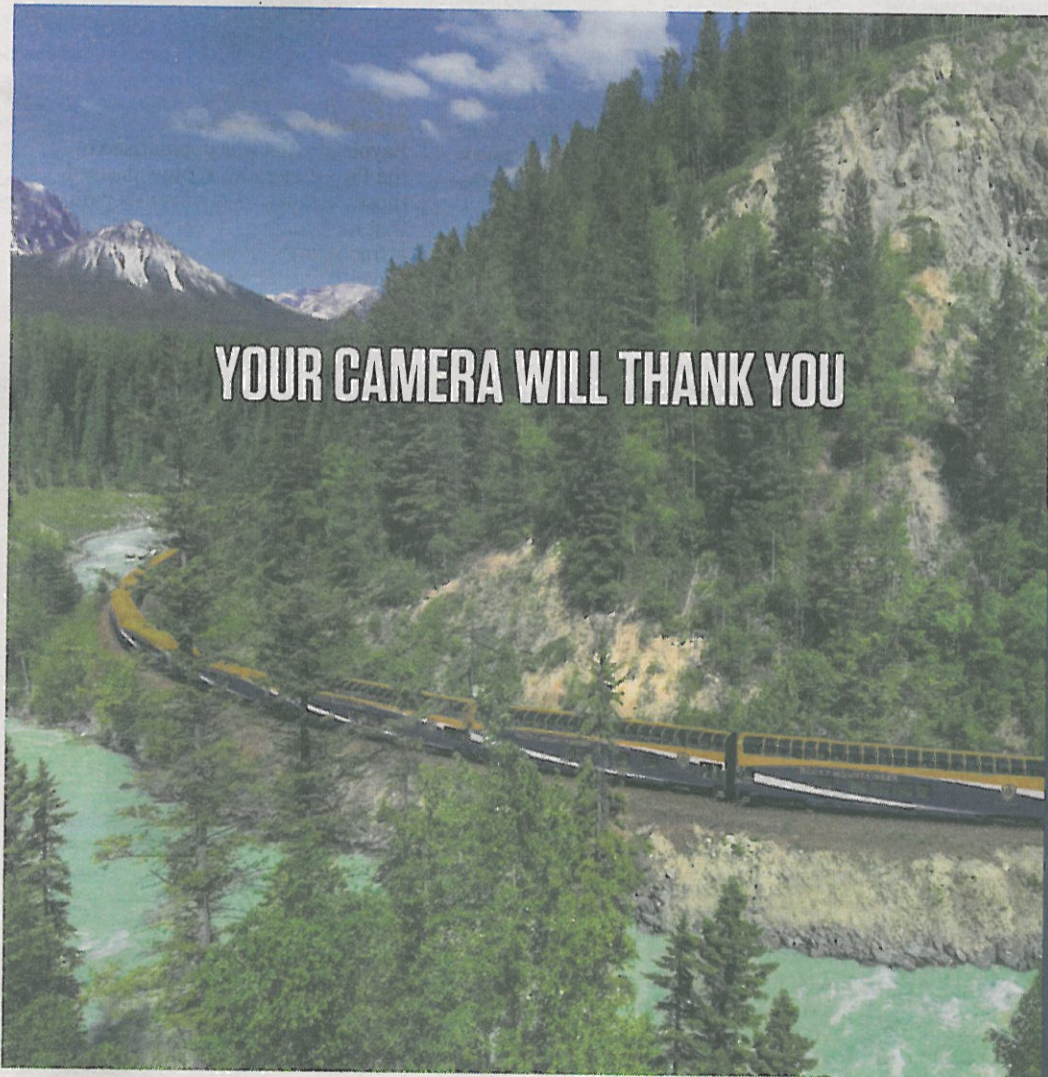
The Grand Hotel de Sète (00 33 467 747177, legrandhotelsete.com) looks on to the main canal like a Venetian palazzo and has doubles from £95 a night. Chambres d'Hôtes Rivages (00 33 7 61 46 65 68, rivages-sete.com) is a timeless stone townhouse with three bedrooms, a tiny pool and B&B doubles from £76.

St-Jean-Cap-Ferrat

Cap Ferrat has long welcomed the ultra-famous, and its kerbs now throng with Parisian licence plates in high summer. Even though celebrities are two a penny, the Cap's petite capital of St-Jean is a village that fame forgot. Stroll along the harbour where fishing boats outnumber superyachts. Or explore the town beach of St-Jean Plage by paddleboard. Coolest of all is Paloma Beach, a curvaceous arc of sand ten minutes on foot from St-Jean. Brad and Angelina may dine at the Paloma Beach Club in summer (sunloungers cost £18 a day), but the rest of the beach is public.

Where to stay

A luxury apartment with two terraces in the heart of historic St-Jean for less than £100? That would be Paloma (00 33 4 97 20 27 30, nicepebbles.com) a short stroll from Paloma Beach, from £65 a night for two to four people.



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