

Take a stroll in...

Villefranche- sur-Mer

Join **Tristan Rutherford** as he soaks up the stunning views and rich cultural heritage of this resort on the Côte d'Azur



The resort of Villefranche-sur-Mer is a fairy-tale vision from whichever direction you arrive. If you come round the bend on the €1.50 bus from Monaco or Nice, it appears Disney-like astride the Mediterranean. Two castles sandwich one historic resort that melts like a pastel-shaded glacier into a clear blue sea. The yacht-dotted waters lend Villefranche its identity and cultural wealth today.

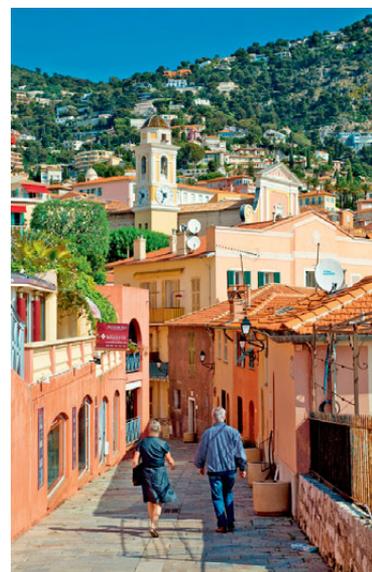
To start the history lesson jump off the bus at the top of town, then tumble slowly seawards. First up is the capaciously cool interior of the Église Saint-Michel. A church was founded here in 1303, along with Villefranche itself, by the peripatetic prince Charles of Anjou (who was Count of Provence and King of Jerusalem among various other titles). The church was rebuilt in the 18th century in the baroque style and its many treasures include a reclining figure of Christ, carved out of fig wood by a galley slave; a nod to the town's maritime past.

By the end of the 1300s, Villefranche had become part of the House of Savoy, straddling areas of modern-day France and Italy. Its overlords spoke Piedmontese Latin, not Parisian French. On streets such as Rue Amiral Albini expect window boxes, washing lines and discarded copies of *Gazzetta dello Sport*. It reminds you that Italy is just a 30-kilometre trip, while Paris is nearly 1,000 kilometres away. A case in point is Rue Obscure; Villefranche's oldest avenue is moodily dark with porticoed ceilings and ancient graffiti. It leads you more towards the Florence of the Medicis than medieval France.

Emerge blinking into the daylight several streets south – and jump a century and a half. You can thank the Turks for the *Citadelle* that sits across the portcullis bridge before you. In 1543 Barbarossa Pasha (the famous 'Red Beard' of the Mediterranean) rowed 110 galleys into Villefranche's perfect natural harbour in an orgy of looting and burning. By 1570, the Dukes of Savoy had built this impregnable castle in response. To deflect cannon fire, there's not a single dead angle in the place. Flags of France, Italy and fascist Germany flew here over time. The *Citadelle* finally dismissed militarism to reopen as a museum in 1981. Wander the Musée Volti's sculptures and the Musée Goetz-Boumeester's pastels at will. Under the overgrown ramparts sits an alfresco stage that doubles as an outdoor cinema each summer.

Facing an ever-present threat from France, the Dukes of Savoy built a fortified harbour just below the *Citadelle*. Pavement cafés and superyacht repairs now crowd this former arsenal, or Darse. Back in 1730, however, the forge and dry dock were repairing boats for Turin's imperial fleet. Information boards in the vault-roofed factory chart this era of piracy ➤

LEFT: Villefranche-sur-Mer seen from the Promenade des Marinières;
ABOVE: A quiet street leads to the Église Saint-Michel



and plunder. In 1770 a prison was added. Rather tragically, it held galley slaves until Villefranche and the rest of Savoy were annexed to France in 1860 (and Turin became part of a newly united Italy). Russian warships were then welcomed in. France's entente partner refuelled their coal-fired steamers near the crystal-clear waters of Plage Darse.

And then came the Americans. Follow the seaside trail under the *Citadelle* to Quai de l'Amiral Courbet. During the 1940s and 1950s, the US Sixth Fleet used Villefranche's 95-metre-deep harbour as a second home. Bordellos and gaming houses ringed this quayside. Homesick sailors found solace in Mère (or Mom) Germaine's alfresco restaurant. Here the adoptive 'Mother of the Sixth Fleet' would dish up seafood and sympathy to those missing their families. Like much of Villefranche, it's now ritzy rather than bawdy. Order carpaccio of scallops and a glass of Bandol and you won't get much change from €50.

Nearby stands a statue of the man who suffused Villefranche with a sophisticated modern allure. Hedonistic writer and artist Jean Cocteau lived in the Welcome Hôtel across the road for eight years. Rumour has it that he bed-hopped with members of Monaco's Ballet Russes, occasionally through an opium haze.

In later life he became a pillar of society. He painted the Chapelle de Saint-Pierre just up the road, breakfasted in the local cafés and still found time to paint the frescoes in the Villa Santo Sospir across the water in Cap Ferrat, which now welcomes fans on guided tours. The epitaph on his statue reads: "When I look at Villefranche, I can see my youth. May Man never allow it to change." Fortunately for the Frenchman, the local bars still pour pastis like it is 1958. 🍷



FASCINATING FACT

Rolling Stone and former Villefranche resident Keith Richards loved to take his speedboat to San Remo, just across the Italian border. Unlike most tourists in 1972, Richards didn't bother to take his passport.

VILLEFRANCHE AT A GLANCE

Stay for a night at... The four-star Welcome Hôtel (tel: (Fr) 4 93 76 27 62, www.welcomehotel.com), which first welcomed Jean Cocteau in 1924. It is now Villefranche's finest hostelry. Every room has both a balcony and sea views. Doubles from €151, breakfast €17.50.

Stop for a coffee at... Cosmo (tel: (Fr) 4 93 01 84 05, www.restaurant-lecosmo.fr) on the buzzing Place Amélie Pollonais. Sit outside and admire the Chapelle de Saint-Pierre across the road.

Stop for lunch at... La Baleine Joyeuse (tel: (Fr) 6 22 28 09 57), which is the place to escape the

tourists. This lunch-only seafood shack on Quai de la Corderie overlooking the marina dishes up two daily chalkboard specials, such as lemon-scented ray wings or olive-roasted cod. Order a glass of Provençal red, grab a plastic chair and join the club.

WHAT TO SEE

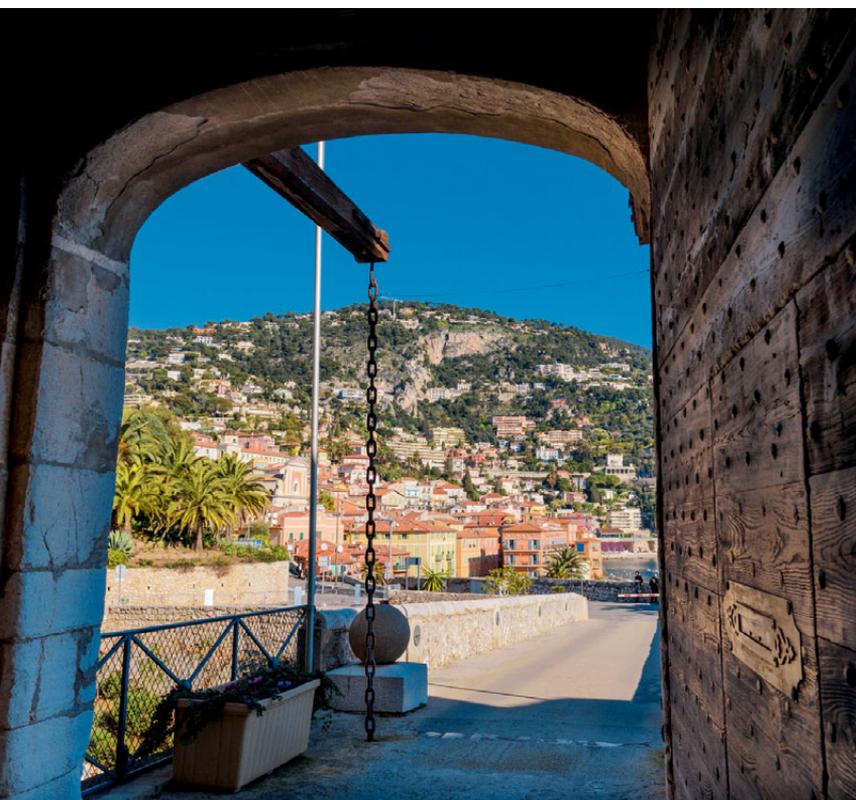
● The Chapelle Saint-Pierre (tel: (Fr) 4 93 76 90 70, admission €2) opposite the Welcome Hôtel had tempted Jean Cocteau since he came to Villefranche in the 1920s. In 1957 he received permission to paint the interior with frescoes in honour of St Peter, patron saint of the sea. Local fishermen were used as models and the result is a zany take on a biblical tale, which raised eyebrows across the Riviera.

● Villefranche's many markets are stunningly sited. Sunday's *brocante* (think antique tourism posters and vintage Chanel shades) is held in Place Amélie Pollonais, a square ringed by pavement cafés, the *Citadelle* and the shimmering sea. For tiny *niçoise* olives, fiery *persillade* parsley dip and other local produce visit Saturday morning's Marché Provençal in Place Octroi. Again it's palm trees and sea views all the way. On Wednesday the same pitch is invaded by vans selling wood-fired *pissaladière* (Nice's unctuous onion and anchovy pizza) and other local bites.



GETTING THERE: The train journey from London to Nice takes 9hr 40min, with return fares from £121 through Voyages-sncf.com (tel: (Fr) 0844 848 5848, www.voyages-sncf.com) - Villefranche is another five minutes

down the line; Nice Airport is served by various UK carriers; It is an 11-hour drive from the northern ferry ports. **TOURIST INFORMATION:** Villefranche-sur-Mer tourist office, tel: (Fr) 4 93 01 73 68, www.villefranche-sur-mer.org



IN THE AREA

Feeling energetic? Soldiers of the House of Savoy used to hike 220 metres up from the *Citadelle* to Mont Alban every day. From the 15th-century fort at the top (admission free), one can signal down to the seafront, or across to Italy and Cap d'Antibes. It is now a picnic spot backed by crumbling ruins.

More castle ruins are visible just a kilometre away, above Nice's *Vieux Port*. Like Villefranche, Nice became part of the House of Savoy in 1388, and was besieged in 1543 by French troops and the Turkish fleet. The encirclement was only broken by *niçoise* heroine Catherine Ségurane, who roused the defenders against the invaders. The Colline du Château is now a panoramic public park scattered with cafés. Down in the *Vieille Ville*, a Turkish cannonball is embedded into a wall in Rue Droite. (<http://en.nicetourisme.com>).

Villefranche is hemmed in by Cap Ferrat, one of the richest stretches of land on the planet. The oh-so-chic Plage de Passable was a favourite of Pablo Picasso. His friend Jean Cocteau often sailed him across the bay from the Welcome Hôtel: a two-minute passage on a windy day, or a 20-minute swim for those so inclined. From the beach, the *Sentier des Douaniers*, a former customs officers' trail (and a smugglers' landing spot before that) loops for six kilometres around the peninsula. It takes in a further four secret beaches and passes the ultra-glamorous Grand-Hôtel du Cap Ferrat.

The road east leads to the Principality of Monaco, ruled by the Grimaldi family since 1297. The current prince, Albert II, resides in the Palais Princier (open 10am to 6pm daily, Apr-Oct, €8, tel: (Mon) 93 25 18 31, www.palais.mc). The changing of the guard ceremony takes place every day at 11.55am and is free.

Back in France, the town of Menton, the last stop before the Italian border, has a new museum dedicated to Jean Cocteau (open 10am to 6pm, exc Tue, €8, tel: (Fr) 4 89 81 52 50, www.museecocteaumenton.fr). His depictions of Villefranche and Cap Ferrat, as well as photographs of the artist on the Côte d'Azur, are housed inside a curving, light-filled space.

CLOCKWISE FROM FACING PAGE: The Chapelle de Saint-Pierre, which was decorated by Jean Cocteau; Villefranche from the *Citadelle*; The covered Rue Obscure, the town's oldest street; The Welcome Hôtel and (left) the Cosmo restaurant; **TOP RIGHT:** Cap Ferrat juts out into the Mediterranean near Villefranche

