

THIS PAGE: The Pointe des Douaniers on the coastal path near Cap-d'Ail; **FACING PAGE:** The architect Le Corbusier's Cabanon and its interior

From Cap to Cap

Walking the coastal path from Cap Martin to the town of Cap-d'Ail leads **Tristan Rutherford** to the startling architecture and delicious tastes of the Côte d'Azur

It's *pain-au-choc-o'clock* in the sunniest corner of France. But on the polyglot peninsulas of the Côte d'Azur, cosmopolitanism is in the air. Cap Martin and Cap-d'Ail are mere miles from Italy and Monaco. My *bière'n'boules* café sells *cioccolato gelato* and *frutti di mare*. The traffic warden is trilingual. He will post your parking fine anywhere in the EU.

Decades ago such diversity attracted Swiss architects, Swedish film stars and Spanish painters. All were recently honoured by two grand cultural openings, plus a new feature film. It's a four-hour, 14-kilometre hike to hit these cultural *caps* in a single day. I gulp my macchiato and call *merci* to *le patron*. It's time to move on.

A bust of architect extraordinaire Le Corbusier marks the trailhead around Cap Martin. A signpost indicates his Cabanon beach house (45 minutes on foot) which reopens to the public this month. It's an Edenic hike there. The path has a fragrant aroma of rosemary, orange blossom and umbrella pine. To the left, an open seascape to Italy shimmers in the morning sun. The path bends and bumps above a swimming pool sea until Monaco comes into view. But the plastic-fantastic Principality

appears as a carbuncle on the coast. Le Corbusier would have been appalled.

The proof can be found in the Cabanon. Set just below the Cap Martin coastal trail, this log cabin is a lesson in South of France simplicity. His modernist methodology decreed that modular beach bliss could be squeezed into less than 14 square metres. Allegedly, it only took the Swiss genius 45 minutes to sketch the design for the cabin in the winter of 1949. At just 3.66 metres by 3.66 metres, his cuboid holiday home proves that happy habitation can come at a minimal cost, although the olive-shaded location above a sandy cove certainly helps.

Just beside the Cabanon, Le Corbusier designed five *Unités de Camping*. At eight square metres each, these 'holiday units' ➡





were a futuristic vision of French tourism. They also reopen for visitors this month. Inside, wooden boxes pivot to make beds and chairs. Slats open to allow cross-ventilation. Window blinds double as shaving mirrors. It's an homage to his famous *Unité d'Habitation* building block in Marseille – in miniature.

Le Corbusier wasn't the first architect to bring modernism to Cap Martin. That title belongs to Irish designer Eileen Gray, whose Villa E-1027 was built alongside the coastal path decades before. Here I meet Michael Likierman, who spearheaded the renovation of these unique cultural spaces (Villa E-1027 reopened this May).

Gray's 1929 creation is a vast white rectangle; yet it's somehow perfectly congruous with its setting of green olives, raging lilac and azure sea. Likierman shows me the futuristic functionality inside. The world's first sliding blinds open on to a panoramic seascape. Art-deco swoops and swirls hide cabinets and drawers. A 'bronzing chamber' solarium is fashioned from black 'tan-fast' tiles.

Likierman explains Le Corbusier's subsequent fascination with Gray. "She was a fabulous member of *les années folles* [the 1920s] and much courted for designing elegant apartments in Paris, before she decided to build a villa for herself by the sea." The Swiss architect rented the Irishwoman's Cap Martin villa in the late 1930s. The fascination turned into jealousy, however, and there was a sense that the unassuming Gray had pipped him to the modernist post. In 1938 Le Corbusier daubed stunning – if inappropriate – frescoes on Gray's clean pastel walls. She was furious and never entered her house again. Le Corbusier died in 1965 while swimming below the villa and is buried nearby. Gray passed away in 1976 and was laid to rest in Père Lachaise cemetery in Paris.

"It was such a drama that they turned the story into a film," says Likierman. He assisted with the recent Cap Martin filming

of *The Price of Desire*, which traces Gray's tumultuous relationship with Le Corbusier. Likierman attended the premiere at the 2015 Dublin Film Festival. "In Ireland she is now worshipped as the greatest Irish designer."

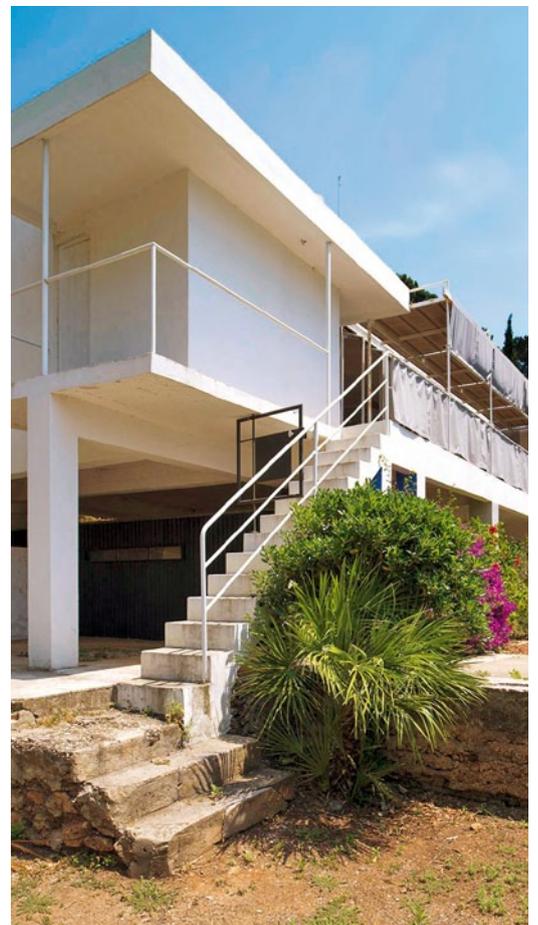
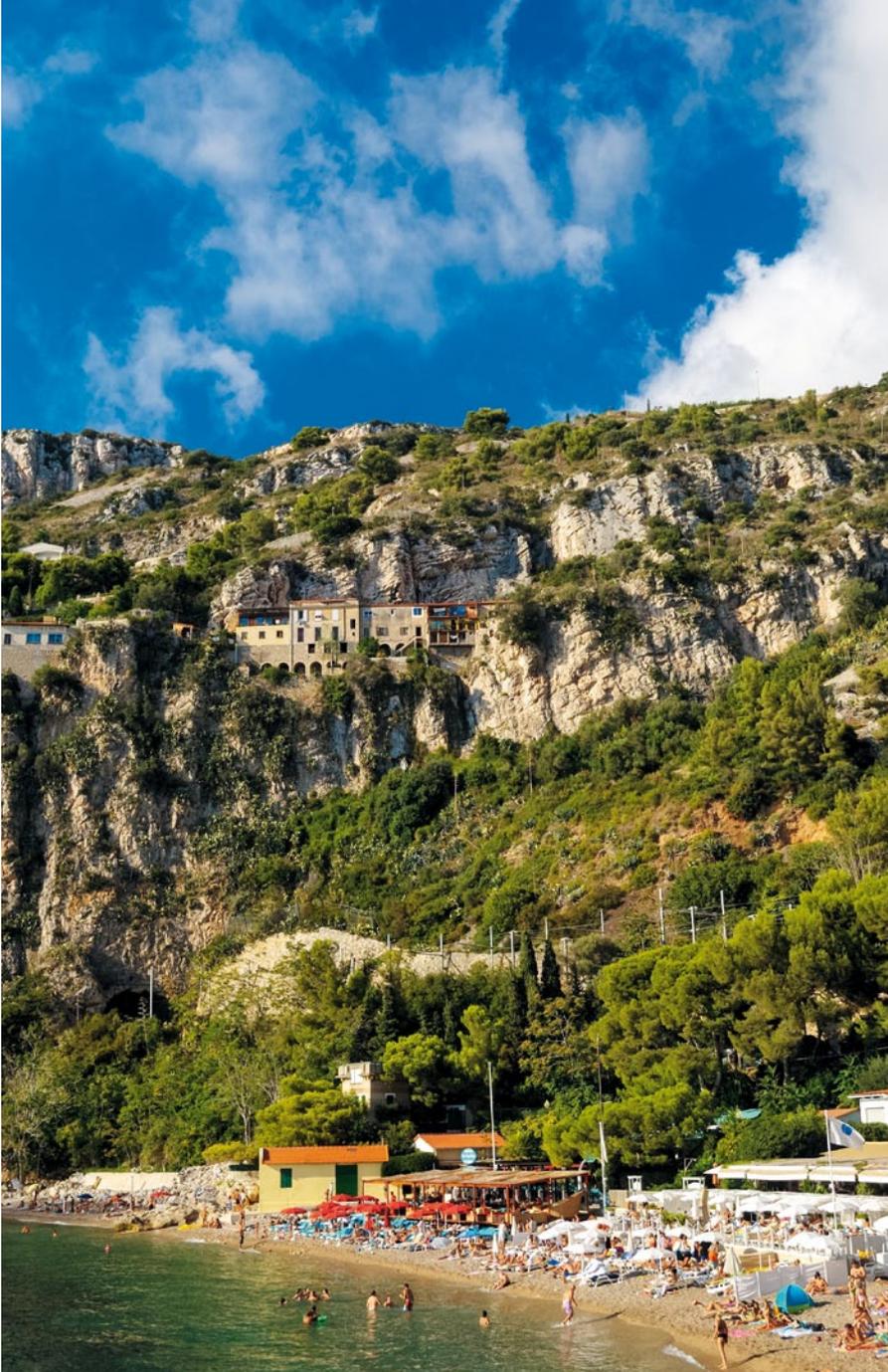
From here to the Monaco border, some 40 minutes away on foot, the trail hits its beachiest reach. Every step is an extravaganza of pine trees, blue seas and ocean breezes. Steps lead down to Plage de Buse, a white arc of public sand, and Plage du Golfe Bleu, an ever-longer sandy curve just beyond. It's a choice between heaven, and heaven plus one. Parascenders – who take a leap of faith from the grand *corniche* clifftops high above – descend like angels to the Golfe Bleu beach. This section of the path is known as the *Sentier des Douaniers*. Customs officials once patrolled this coast to guard against cigarette smuggling to Italy, and, rather more healthily, contraband olive oil coming in the other direction.

Glorious suburb

I pause to buy a *pan bagnat* (a *salade niçoise* in a bun) at Roquebrune-Cap-Martin's little station. (Likierman and team are refurbishing the unused sidings into another cultural space, due to open in stages until 2017.) Beaches become coves, and coves become nameless creeks, until I find four square metres of shingle beside Monaco for a snack/siesta/swim. I need it, as my coastal walk is only half done.

Like a fool, I choose to hike the four kilometres across Monaco (non-masochists can take the No. 6 bus across the country for just €2). The Principality's reclaimed seaside suburb of Fontvieille abuts the French border. Surprisingly it hosts an 'international airport', where scheduled seven-minute helicopter shuttles to Nice Airport depart every 15 minutes. Such exuberance created the glorious French suburb of Cap-d'Ail next door. I cross the street into France to find out more. ➡➡

COASTAL TRAIL



CLOCKWISE, FROM TOP LEFT: Le Corbusier's *Unités de Camping* on Cap Martin; Summertime at Plage Mala, Cap-d'Ail; The interior and exterior of Villa E-1027 on Cap Martin; The coastal trail clinging to the cliff face

The final three-and-a-half kilometres of coastal path from the beaches of Plage Marquet to Plage Mala weren't built for *les douaniers*. Oh no. The route was generously provided by Monaco's Société des Bains de Mer – the company that owns the Casino de Monte-Carlo – to provide highrollers with a scenic route to the baccarat tables. Information boards explain the Monégasque provenance of the rococo mansions that line the route. Villa 'The Rock' was frequented by Greta Garbo after partying in the Principality. La Capponcina, just above the path, was owned by newspaper baron Lord Beaverbrook and hosted casino enthusiast Sir Winston Churchill. Various mansions were used as escapes by Princess Grace when she fled the stifling aura of Palace politics.

As the trail continues, the Tête Chien, the dog-head cape perched 500 metres above the shoreline, becomes increasingly visible. This Jurassic limestone outcrop serves to block any clouds from the coast below. In turn this microclimate nourishes the yuccas, bougainvillea and Aleppo pines that shield the afternoon sun.

Above the trail comes the constant rattle of the railway line. Amazingly, these bucolic tracks still serve direct trains from Nice to Monaco, Milan and Moscow. In 1881, the inauguration of Cap-d'Ail's railway station – reached from the



ABOVE: Walking next to the azure waters of the Mediterranean;
RIGHT: The Villa les Camélias history museum in Cap-d'Ail

trail via a steep staircase – made the resort complete. Yes, it took 55 minutes to Nice (it now takes 18) and 22 hours to London (it's now less than ten), but it enabled the belle époque's richest to disembark and take root. Such history is colourfully detailed in the new Villa les Camélias history museum two minutes from the terminal.

The villa's director Hélène Bonafous meets me outside its gilded entrance. Only in the South of France could a local history museum boast jasmine-scented gardens, panoramic sea views and a swimming pool. Madame Bonafous uses exhibits from the first floor's cabinet of curiosities to explain the biography of the coastal trail. Photographs from 1880 of La Villa Sanitas (now a retirement home) show how wealthy consumptives paid handsomely for a sunny cure. A cover story in *Le Petit Journal* in 1892 shows the Russian Tsar's brother holidaying in Cap-d'Ail. A 1957 handwritten note from Sir Winston's wife Clementine thanks the *mairie* for her visit. (The telephone number at the top reads Knightsbridge 7171, should they ever wish to call.) There is even a card from a bordello on the border, the exquisitely named Loup Blanc. The brothel minted its own secret currency to gift access to the privileged few. The flipside of each coin reads '*Bienvenue au Paradis*'.

Precipitous cliffs

"Cap-d'Ail has always been a back door to Monaco," explains Madame Bonafous. She directs me to one final villa: the Eden Résidence, which crowns the end of Cap-d'Ail's coastal trail. Built by Baron de Pauville in 1882, its 150 rooms contained every luxury: private bathrooms, electricity from a bespoke generator, plus scheduled 'hippomobile' access to Monaco from the foyer. The Brontë sisters, artist Jean Cocteau and author Sacha Guitry all checked in. Sadly, the Eden's final accoutrement was never built. As I walk in the setting sun to Plage Mala, the remains of a small turret are visible on the beach. Believe it or not, an alpine-style funicular cable car was once planned between beach and hotel.

Precipitous cliffs block my onward route. The *Sentier du Littoral* begins again at Beaulieu-sur-Mer seven kilometres further on and continues around the French coast for thousands of kilometres. But that's a story for another day. 📍

Turn to page 50 for travel information. ➡

● See our next issue for an interview with architectural expert Jonathan Meades, who lives in Le Corbusier's Cité Radieuse in Marseille. Our August issue will feature a trail of Le Corbusier's best French sites.

PHOTOGRAPHS: RUTHERFORD TOMASETTI PARTNERS; BARBARA LECOMTE

SAME PLACE, DIFFERENT PACE

Leave dry land and take to a paddleboard

This summer the South of France has gone SUP mad. Stand-up paddleboards started as a craze in Hawaii when surfers found they could stand atop a calm surface and explore the coast with an ultra-light oar. Bespoke paddleboards have become wider, lighter and more buoyant. It only takes five minutes to learn (unlike surfing) and it's almost impossible to fall in.

The Base Nautique at Cap-d'Ail's Plage Marquet (tel: (Fr) 4 93 78 55 50, www.fairedelavoile.fr) is among the latest outfits to rent SUPs for the standard price of €15 per hour. After five minutes paddling on your knees to get the feel of the board, you can stand up and row along the coastal trail: Monaco in one direction, Èze in the other. Either way, fish dart below your SUP as the sunshine filters through the Neptune grass on the seabed.

Plage Mala has a less formal watersports set-up in a seaside beach shack, but the location is far more attractive. To your right lie the crashing cliffs and hidden creeks of Saint-Laurent-d'Èze, a scene previously enjoyed only by those with a private yacht. An Evian-style mineral water source seeps out 100 metres from the beach, resulting in a profusion of sub-tropical fish. It's also possible to weave below the villas of The Rock and L'Ermitage du Cap Fleuri along Cap-d'Ail's *Sentier du Littoral*, most of which are best seen from afar.

Menton's Centre Nautique (tel: (Fr) 4 93 35 49 70, www.voilementon.fr) rents SUPs for €13 per hour from the protected bay beside the La Pergola beach club. Paddle out to see Jean Cocteau's Musée du Bastion. You'll have to return to dry land, though, to see the oceanfront Musée Cocteau, which houses 1,800 exhibits donated by Belgian-American collector Séverin Wunderman. The building was designed by Rudy Ricciotti, the architect behind Marseille's new MuCEM (tel: (Fr) 4 89 81 52 5 <http://museecocteaumenton.fr>).





The Villa Thalassa youth hostel on the coastal trail at Cap-d'Ail

Francofile *Making your way along the Côte d'Azur trail*



GETTING THERE

By train: The rail journey from London to Cap-d'Ail and Cap Martin via Paris and Nice takes ten hours. Fares start from £123 return through Voyages-sncf.com (tel: 0844 848 5848, www.voyages-sncf.com).

By air: The nearest airport is Nice.

By road: Cap-d'Ail is around an 11-hour drive from the northern ferry ports.

WHERE TO STAY

Hotel Victoria

7 Promenade du Cap Martin
06190 Roquebrune-Cap-Martin
Tel: (Fr) 4 93 35 65 90
www.hotel-victoria.fr
Stupendous sea-view hotel at the sunny start point of the Cap Martin coastal trail. The 32 rooms are styled in homage to local greats, including Le Corbusier, Eileen Gray, Picasso and Henri Matisse. Doubles from €79.

Villa Thalassa
2 Avenue Raymond Gramaglia
06320 Cap-d'Ail

Tel: (Fr) 4 93 78 18 58
www.clajsud.fr
Only in France: a hostel sited within a multi-million-euro villa, surrounded by the world's most expensive real estate. The genial trilingual manager Paolo is an expert on the surrounding villas and coastline. The knockout set dinner served on a sea view terrace costs just €12. Dormitory beds from €20; private double rooms also available.

Hotel Miramar

126 Avenue du 3 Septembre
06320 Cap-d'Ail
Tel: (Fr) 4 93 78 06 60
www.miramarhotel.fr
Arguably the French Riviera's best bargain. The two-star Miramar commands views across the entire coast from its perched location off the Nice-Monaco *basse corniche* coastal road. Doubles from €68; terrace rooms and family rooms are a little extra.

Le Roquebrune

100 Avenue Jean Jaurès
06190 Roquebrune-Cap-Martin
Tel: (Fr) 4 93 35 00 16
www.le-roquebrune.com
This *hôtel de charme* has just six guestrooms and enjoys spectacular sea views as well as the benefit of private parking. Doubles from €120.

FOR AN APÉRO

La Pinède

10 Avenue Raymond Gramaglia
06320 Cap-d'Ail
Tel: (Fr) 4 93 78 37 10
www.restaurantlapinede.com
Although pricey for eating (the delicious three-course menu with *tartare de boeuf* weighs in at €34), this restaurant is a dream for aperitifs, especially as the chic beach cabin sits on the Cap-d'Ail coastal trail. The €5 glasses of rosé slip back easily as the sun sinks on the lapping Mediterranean below.

WHERE TO EAT

Le Piccadilly

16 Avenue François de Monléon
06190 Cap Martin
Tel: (Fr) 4 93 35 87 16
www.lepiccadilly.com
Visit this locals' favourite for a slap-up Provençal meal. Admittedly, the cloakroom dates from the 1970s (complete with vintage phone booth), but for *cod aïoli*, *linguine frutti di mare* and bargain *pichets* of wine, it's unsurpassed. Menus from €17.50.

Le Cabanon

Pointe des Douaniers
06320 Cap-d'Ail
Tel: (Fr) 4 93 78 01 94
www.capresort.com/cabanon
It's not cheap, but the shabby-chic location of this beach shack diner – on a rocky outcrop jutting into the Mediterranean – is sublime. Grab a Ricard and set of *boules*, or order a grilled bream. Mains from €18.

L'Éden

Allée Mala
06320 Cap d'Ail
Tel: (Fr) 4 93 78 17 06
Sit on cushioned booths perched on Plage Mala, while waiters shuffle back and forth with platters of tuna *tataki* and bottles of Bandol. Mains from €15.

ATTRACTIONS

Villa E-1027 and Le Cabanon

Avenue de la Gare
06190 Roquebrune-Cap-Martin
Tel: (Fr) 6 48 72 90 53
www.capmoderne.com
Guided visits Tue-Sun, 10am and 2pm (3.30pm July and Aug). Entry €15.

Villa les Camélias

17 Avenue Raymond Gramaglia
06320 Cap-d'Ail
Tel: (Fr) 4 93 98 36 57
www.villalescamelias.com
Entry €9, under-12s free. Open Apr-Oct, except Mon and Sat; Dec-Mar, Sun, Tue and Thu.

i TOURIST INFORMATION: Cap d'Ail tourist office, tel: (Fr) 4 93 78 02 33, www.cap-dail.com; Roquebrune-Cap-Martin tourist office, tel: (Fr) 4 93 35 62 87, www.roquebrune-cap-martin.com; Côte d'Azur regional tourist board www.cotedazur-tourisme.com