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'Glitzy five-star hotels and Michelin star restaurants are a fraction of the usual price'

Tristan Rutherford on winter deals on the French Riviera

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France

Cheap and chic: winter on the Riviera

Five-star classic hotels are quiet, the rates are low and the temperatures tempting in the off-season, says **Tristan Rutherford**

In the winter of 1882 Queen Victoria sojourned in the South of France. As the French Riviera receives more off-season sun than Athens, her stay turned into one long Indian summer. She returned five times until 1899, bringing 100 servants in her private train from Calais. Every lord, prince and minor aristocrat followed her footsteps south, trailblazing the winter warmer we know today.

Alas, with the advent of paid two-week holidays for the French in the 1930s, the high season flipped from winter to summer. "But autumn and winter are now back in fashion," says Marc Leveau, manager of the ritzy Grand Hôtel du Cap-Ferrat. "By welcoming guests with quiet beaches, shopping tours and off-season rates, it now makes commercial sense to open virtually year-round."

The hotel's off-season rates are attractive too. In summer, suites hover at about £3,500 a night (the presidential suite is £12,500 with a 15-night minimum stay). But in winter doubles start from £225, a saving of £325 on the summer rate (60 per cent off). Low-season guests can still luxuriate in the Club Dauphin beach club and the hotel's seven hectares of Mediterranean gardens. You get 200 days of sunshine a year here; like the rest of the French Riviera, Cap Ferrat is enveloped by the Alpes-Maritimes mountains, so it basks in a microclimate where palm trees and wild parrots flourish (it was 26C in late October).

Gustave Eiffel designed the Grand Hôtel du Cap-Ferrat's foyer. Stella McCartney learnt to swim in the hotel's Olympic-size pool. To cater for an off-season client-

tele, the hotel also offers reduced prices in its restaurants, which are overseen by the Michelin-starred chef Didier Aniès. A gourmet set dinner costs £75, down from £195 in summer. The house cocktail is £14. If you think that's expensive, just imagine what previous guests such as Bill Clinton and Beyoncé forked out in peak season.

What's on the menu for off-season sightseeing? The Villa Ephrussi de Rothschild lies midway along Cap Ferrat. Work started on this bright pink stately home in 1905, four years after Victoria's passing, when her son Edward VII — "Prince Bertie" — rocked the Riviera each winter. If this wedding-cake mansion ever came on the market it would be among the most expensive properties in the world (one claimant to that title is the nearby Villa Leopolda, once owned by the head of Fiat, Gianni Agnelli, which sold for half a billion euros in 2008). The publicly owned villa has Sevres porcelain, Louis XIV carpets and 8m-high ceilings. On my visit in October there wasn't a soul there, despite the million-dollar panoramas over the Mediterranean. Yet the uber-rich pay thousands for private viewings here after closing time during the summer.

The villa was once owned by Béatrice Ephrussi de Rothschild. The Lady Gaga



Above: Menton. Below: The Grand Hôtel du Cap-Ferrat. Below right: the Villa Ephrussi de Rothschild

meets Tamara Ecclestone of her day, she had antiques from Paris railroaded to Beaulieu station nearby. She would then rifle through them — car-boot style — on the platform edge. The leftovers would be dumped at her apartment in Monaco, ten minutes down the line. It helped that the Rothschild family owned shares in the Paris-Lyon-Méditerranée railway.

An empty carriage whisks me along that very train line to Nice, five minutes in the other direction. Before the railroad arrived in 1863 it took two weeks to travel from London to the French Riviera. After the train arrived, London to Nice took just 21 hours, rendering the South of France "doable" (the TGV from St Pancras to the Mediterranean now takes six hours).

The stroll from Nice-Ville station to the Promenade des Anglais elicits memories of Victoria's day. The seaside boulevard is sun-kissed and smart. Street artists and dance classes still fill the promenade, although it was Matisse and Picasso, plus Sarah Bernhardt and Isadora Duncan, a century ago. Back then, Nice's three-mile public beach was frequented only by fisherwives. Now it's rammed in summer, but is quiet in winter today.

For added colour, step one block back from the promenade to the daily Cours Saleya fruit and flower market. Each winter it becomes a south-facing suntrap. You can linger for two hours over a morning

macchiato then stock up with local oranges, lemons, lavender and squid from the stalls that line the street.

Come February, shoppers will also buy a bunch of winter blossoms and carry them back to the promenade during Nice's family-friendly Carnaval. This three-week street parade culminates in the Battle of the Flowers, where performers lob mimosas into the crowd, who lob them back with a vengeance. Queen Vic loved the scene — the Mayor of Nice provided her with a private stack of blossoms to chuck.

Such scenes are remembered in the Nice history museum inside the promenade's Villa Masséna. Period exhibits in this publicly owned mansion include sleeper train tickets from London to Cannes, costumes from masked balls during Carnaval and printed menus — soupe An-

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It's 100 per cent Riviera with 10 per cent of the tourists for 30 per cent of the price

DAVID C. TOMLINSON/GETTY IMAGES



glais, rosbif à la moutarde — from Victoria's stay. One street map divvies up the promenade's villas to show who is staying where for the season. British royalty, American tycoons and Russian oligarchs rented chichi villas — Airbnb-style — before the Riviera's grand hotels set up shop at the turn of the century.

Another empty train carriage takes me west towards Cannes. There are blue skies and turquoise seas as we putter past Antibes and Juan-les-Pins, each a rococo resort that's discovering its winter mojo. Indeed, why pay £650 for a summer night at the landmark Hotel Martinez in Cannes when the same room costs from £120 in low season, room only?

I alight at Mandelieu-la Napoule, one stop past Cannes, to visit another stately home that sums up the off-season Riviera. The Château de La Napoule was a party pad a century ago, a castle rebuilt by the artist and banking heir Henry Clews with his debutante wife Marie. Maguis herbs slow roast in the châteaux public gardens. Two snorkelers skindive in the warm



autumn Mediterranean, a sport that hardy locals partake in until Christmas. Private jets from Cannes's tiny airport fly out to sea then curve towards the north. The only other visitors are a school group from the local bilingual primary who stumbling round the garden treasure hunt shouting "boff", "oi" and "oh la la".

There's time for one final homage to a place that's just invested in the Riviera winter. A private car whisks me to the nearby Tiara Miramar, a new hotel with Moorish modern décor that will be open all year round. "Guests from northern Europe are using year-round flights to enjoy the Riviera sunshine through winter," says the general manager Jérôme Montantème. "And to be frank, I don't blame them."

To corner this 12-month market Montantème offers food foraging in autumn, guided hikes in winter and sailing in spring, plus bargain off-season rates. As with my other stops in the South of France, it's 100 per cent of the Riviera with 10 per cent of the tourists for 30 per cent of the price. Like Queen Vic, I'm sold.

Need to know

Where to eat

Menton

Menton, on the Italian border, was a favourite of Queen Victoria. Hit the sunniest town in France to find frutti di mare, scallops à la Provençale and gambas grillade in restaurants such as Le Cirque (www.restaurantlecirque.com; mains from €11). Just along the coast, on a sun-kissed terrace the Cap Ferrat classic Capitaine Cook (00 33 493 76 02 66; set menus from €22) serves bouillabaisse and grilled bream.

Nice

The newest restaurant in Nice is the locally run Bar des Oiseaux (00 33 493 80 27 33; mains from €9) in the old town. It pairs Niçoise specialities such as petits farcis stuffed vegetables and panisse chickpea chips with ravioli from Barale, the city's famed pasta maker.

Cannes

The ritzy restaurant Mantel (restaurantmantel.com; set menus from €27) sources its ingredients from the nearby Forville market. The head chef Noël Mantel's locally inspired menu includes Provençale beef stew and rabbit with rosemary. Most restaurants on the Riviera — including all the ones listed here — are open year-round.

What to see

Both the Villa Ephrussi de Rothschild (villa-ephrussi.com; entrance €10) and the Château de La Napoule (chateau-lanapoule.com; entrance €2.50) are open daily year-round.

Getting there

EasyJet (0843 1045000, easyjet.com) offers year-round daily flights from London Gatwick, Luton and Stansted to Nice from €28.99 one way. Great Rail Journeys (01904 527181, greatrail.com/grj-independent) offers tailor-made TGV rail packages in the footsteps of Queen Victoria from London St Pancras to Nice, with a three-night stay in Nice's Belle Epoque Excelsior Chateaux Hotel, from £489pp.

Winter hotel deals on the French Riviera

Room rates at some of the Riviera's grandest hotels are routinely 70 per cent less than in the summer.

The Grand Hôtel du Cap-Ferrat

The choice of royalty and celebrity. Classified as a five-star palace by the French authorities, it's perched on the end of Cap Ferrat, one of the world's most expensive pieces of real estate. Low-season packages include two nights for two with grand buffet breakfast plus two treatments in the hotel's Carita spa for €690.

Details From €225 per double per night. The hotel is closed in January and February (00 33 493 76 50 50, grand-hotel-cap-ferrat.com)

The Tiara Miramar, Théoule-sur-Mer

A new Mediterranean idyll, the open year-round Tiara has three Provençal restaurants overseen by Fabrice Giraud, late of the Shangri-La in Istanbul. His MoYa seaside eatery is like a Turkish beach club with searing hobs, spinning rotisseries and red-hot pizza ovens. The order of the day is the 12 tartare tasting menu that runs from lamb with mango to raw shrimp.

Details From £128 B&B (00 33 493 75 05 05, miramar-beachspa.tiara-hotels.com)

Hotel Victoria, Roquebrune-cap-Martin

One of the hippest design hotels on the coast, Hotel Victoria is open year-round and is styled with the designer lines of Le Corbusier and Eileen Gray, both of whom lived on the Roquebrune-Cap-Martin peninsula. Monaco is an hour's walk away along a beach-lined coastal path.

Details Doubles from €63 a night (00 33 493 35 65 90, hotel-victoria.fr)

Le Napoléon, Menton

A sister establishment to Hotel Victoria, Le Napoléon reopens at Christmas after a renovation. Its decoration is an homage to the writer and film-maker Jean Cocteau, whose new museum opened a five-minute stroll away in 2013.

Details Seaview doubles from €69 a

night (00 33 493 35 89 50, napoleon-menton.com)

Hotel Martinez, Cannes

This five-star favourite with stars during the film festival is in a prime position on the Croisette and has a spa and a swimming pool.

Details Doubles from €120, room only (00 33 493 90 12 34, cannesmartinez.grand.hyatt.com)

Fairmont Monte Carlo

With the Hôtel de Paris now closed for a four-year renovation, the place to stay in the principality is the Fairmont Monte Carlo, below. In 2014, the hotel launched an outpost of the sushi restaurant Nobu. Regular rooms top €650 in summer.

Details Doubles are from €205 (00 377 93 50 65 00, fairmont.com/monte-carlo)



Riviera apartments

For the best off-season bargain, book a villa, or at least a rental apartment. The Côte d'Azur's leading holiday letting agency, Riviera Pebbles (+33 (0)497 20 27 30, nicepebbles.com), has more than 180 prime properties from Antibes to Cap Ferrat. Each designer apartment boasts wi-fi, L'Occitane toiletries and a welcome basket with wine. The grand apartment Serenity (from €140 per night for six) behind Nice's Le Negresco hotel has a balcony and three luxurious bedrooms. More humble Nice properties such as Amandine (from €50 per night for two) offer heaps of old-town charm.