

Live it up for less on the glitzy French Riviera

Stay on a private island, rent a boat or get an exclusive museum viewing — all for peanuts. **Tristan Rutherford** blags some bling

I'm driving my yacht tender through the billionaires' bay of Villefranche-sur-Mer. It's only 11am but my wife has already cracked open the Veuve Clicquot. If I spin the speedboat 360 degrees I can see the former mansions of Gianni Agnelli, Keith Richards and Jean Cocteau. Other guests en route to their million-pound-a-week chartered superyachts give me a knowing nod. The only difference is that I haven't got a yacht to go to — I've only rented this runaround for £125 for the day (that's £15 an hour). And the champagne? I nabbed it from the cooler at Carrefour Express up the road.

The French Riviera has glamour à gogo. But as a longtime resident I can assure you that much of the bling is a blag, with more cosmetic enhancements on show than a St Tropez beach club. Indeed, Villefranche has welcomed more penniless artists than poseurs. Cocteau painted and partied through an opium fug at the town's bargain Hotel Welcome. In his free time he daubed the Chapelle Saint-Pierre opposite the hotel with sexy, fleshy wall frescoes. As visitors are let in one by one I take in the Cocteau gallery in absolute privacy — oligarch-style — for the princely sum of just £2.20. Too pricey? Villefranche's castle with its three museums is absolutely free.

Cocteau used to row his pal Pablo Picasso across the bay from Villefranche to Cap Ferrat. I dive over the speedboat's side near Plage de Passable, Picasso's favoured beach. This peninsula may host the world's most expensive property (a

single square metre of gravel drive hovers at about £31,000; only Monaco is pricier), but Cap Ferrat is also a freebie haven, with six public beaches linked by a five-mile coastal trail. This being socialist France, the seaside route I now stroll down runs alongside the scented gardens of former residents David Niven and W Somerset Maugham, plus the Four Seasons Grand Hotel du Cap Ferrat. I stop for a snorkel on the new 200m underwater scuba trail on Plage des Fossettes, then continue along the Cap Ferrat route to Plage Paloma, where Brad and Angelina dine *pieds dans l'eau* — toes in the water — when in town.

The next day I trial the recently revamped Côte d'Azur card (cotedazurcard.com). The pass grants free access to 160 museums, tours and water sports from Cannes to the Italian border for £30 over three days (£16 for under-16s), including a Segway tour of Nice (normally £13), sea kayaking in Menton (normally £10) and

the ferry to the subtropical Lérins Islands just off the Cap d'Antibes (normally £12).

I use the Côte d'Azur card to hit Antibes. In another era this seaside town was for paupers not poseurs. So tight were resources after the Second World War that Picasso, holed up in the landmark Château Grimaldi, painted on crates, boxes and the castle walls. The château is now the Musée Picasso — entrance is free with the Côte d'Azur card or £4.50 otherwise — and his period output is housed inside.

From here I follow the street trail of artist canvases down to Antibes' port. Even larger than nearby Monaco, Nice or Cannes, the harbour is the fabled home of Millionaires' Quay — now rechristened



Billionaires' Quay — where the world's fabulous yachts are berthed. After a free gawp I nip through the hole in the harbour wall to Antibes' sandy town beach. Local resident Roman Abramovich regularly moors his 162m (533ft) megayacht *Eclipse* just offshore. Well-dressed visitors can sneak in for a £7 Orangina at the Hotel du Cap-Eden-Roc next to his Cap d'Antibes villa. That said, my neighbour's beach picnic of saucisson sarnies and supermarket rosé looks far more fun.

Need to know

Where to stay

When booked in advance, French Riviera accommodation can be a steal. Private double rooms are available at Villa Thalassa, a multimillion-euro villa that serves as a hostel from £15pp B&B (00 33 493 78 18 58, clajsud.fr). The abundant set dinner costs £9. The establishment even has a sister villa, Cap Caravelle, on the Cap d'Antibes with the same rates. Simple double rooms can also be found at Villa St Exupéry Beach opposite Galeries Lafayette in Nice from £28 B&B (00 33 493 16 13 45, villahostels.com). In Villefranche, the bucolic beachside Hotel Patricia has rooms from £53, albeit with railway noise from the tracks just behind (00 33 493 01 06 70, hotel-patricia.riviera.fr). The town's Hotel Welcome (00 33 493 76 27 62, welcomehotel.com), where every room has balcony and sea view, is worth paying out £118 a night. Finally, did you know that you can bag private island accommodation for £30pp, half-board, a night? The Cistercian monks on Île Saint-Honorat (abbayedelerins.com) offer monastic rooms on their 2km-long paradise island near Cannes.

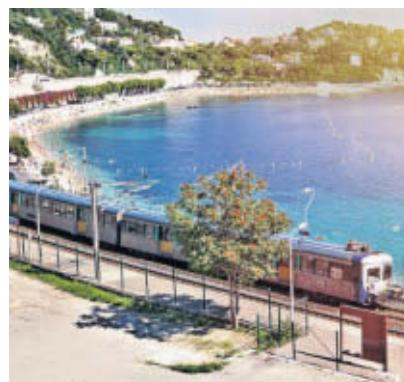
How to get there

British Airways (0344 4980787, ba.com) has flights from London from £96 return. EasyJet (0843 1045000, 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.

Getting around on a budget

Families can save a stack with SNCF's Carte Isabelle (ter.sncf.com/paca). It offers two adults plus two kids unlimited hop-on hop-off Côte d'Azur train travel for £27 a day. Brand-new offering Nice Car (nice-car.fr, from £27) must be seen to be believed; a turquoise three-wheeler that spits out multilingual tourist info as it guides you around the Riviera by GPS. Dark Pelican (darkpelican.com) in Villefranche rents speedboats from £127 a day (no licence required). Cap Ferrat Watersports (00 33 616 67 78 28, capferratwatersports.com) rents paddleboards (from £11) for tranquil exploration. Monaco is never cheap but its Twizzy



Save money on trains with SNCF's Carte Isabelle

(mobee.mc) electric car-share vehicles can be rented from the Fairmont Hotel (fairmont.com/monte-carlo) for £31 an hour. From here you can circle the 2.2km Formula One grand prix route that tunnels underneath the hotel around the port.



GETTY IMAGES; CHRIS HELLIER/CORBIS



Villefranche-sur-Mer

