

Sailing the Riviera

Overview: you do not go to the Riviera to sail, you go there to enjoy life. Feel like Cary Grant and Brigitte Bardot hopping between amazing villas, superb restaurants, amazing islands and a timeless sense of style.

The top places to visit: Nice, Villefranche, Cannes, St Tropez, Lerins Islands, Cap Ferrat, Porquerolles and Port Cros

Our rating:

Wind and Sea: easy.

Kids friendly: yes

Lifestyle: super-fashionable

Gourmet: immense

Mileage (approx) :80

Cruise length: 1 week

When to go: year round

Harbours and marinas: perfect and good value

Gourmet and restaurants: one of the gourmet capitals of France

Our top 3 SAILPRO anchorages

1. Iles Lerins
2. Port Man(Port Cros Island)
3. Villefranche



Our top 3 SAILPRO anchorages

1. Iles Lerins
2. Port Man(Port Cros Island)
3. Villefranche

Our Sailing notes

Although the French southern coastline have seen better days in terms of natural beauty, a cruise along the famous Riviera still rewards any kind of traveller, even if those preferring sophistication will find richer rewards while beachcombers might feel less at ease sometimes. A journey by must be different than a trip on land, so, if we want to chose just 7 places to stop overnight, we'll leave some spots like Monte Carlo, St.Paul de Vence and Grasse to those moving on wheels.

Weather: gentle climate does not mean that the sea is always calm. True, the Mistral here comes from the land and is greatly limited by the coastal range, but southerlies can blow and especially raise a nasty swell all over the coast even in summer. But chances to stay put in a harbour for a gale are slim, even in winter. One must on the other side expect to motor a lot if in a hurry. The main thing to enhance safety is the simply unbelievable number and quality of marinas, literally one every four miles, all nicely regulated and offering transit berths, full service and a really competitive deal, averaging 45 euros for a 12 metres yacht. True, some are somewhat shabby and too big, but there are small jewels: St. Jean Cap Ferrat, Villefranche, Nice (centre), Antibes, Porquerolles and St. Tropez. The weather forecast in F and English is channel 21 to 23, Monaco Radio, 3 bulletins a day, round the clock, very reliable.

Anchorages, on the other side, are far from plentiful, and very few can offer shelter from all quadrants. Beauty often overcomes comfort reasons. Anyway, here is a list where you can combine good shelter and great location. St. Jean (open to SE), Villefranche (open to SW), Cap D'Antibes (open S), Iles Lerins (very good shelter), Rade D'Agay (very good shelter), Rade de St.Tropez (open to SE), Cap Camarat, (open E), Port Cros (very good shelter), Porquerolles (very good shelter), Tour Fondue, Calanques (excellent shelter but bottomless). The holding ground is not great but not bad, usually sand and grass, with everyone fighting for blue spots.

Gourmet. This is gourmet paradise, but does not come cheap. A must see are the square markets, where you can splurge in fish, saucisson and other ways to transform a pig into a thing to die for, olives and derivatives, cheeses by the tons and other French specialties. Beaulieu, Villefranche, Nice, Antibes, St.Raphael, Toulon and many other smaller towns can boast a great market. Enquire to the port chaps for advice. Products of the area are mussels, rockfish, fish soup (soupe de poisson) and the world famous bouillabaisse (you won't order anything else for the rest of the day), cheeses and olive pates.

As for the restaurants, here are our suggestions:

Cafe de Turin - Nice

Boccaccio - Nice

Mere Germaine - villefranche

La Caffettiera, Antibes

Chez Fonfon - Marseille

Our Itinerary

St.Jean Cap Ferrat/Villefranche. The group of bays around the spectacular Cap Ferrat and the delightful village of Villefranche are one of the top three places of the area. You might expect Cary Grant sneaking out at night to meet Grace Kelly in one of the most expensive villas of the planet, you can swim in well sheltered crystal waters, enjoy the topless girls on the beaches, share the same anchorages of the biggest superyachts around and get lost among the alleys of St.Jean and Villefranche itself. There are at least 5 anchorages, St.Jean and Villefranche being the best. Too many places to see also inland, Eze Village, 10 kilometres from St.Jean, among them. One can stay here forever. Anchorages deep into Villefranche Bay, where convenient (open to the SW, in this case you can find decent shelter in front of St. Jean, another very nice anchorage, just NW of Pt. St. Hospice). A favourite with good weather is the small bay at the S end of the Cape, 43°41'7.80"N, 7°20'10.29"E.

Nice is a boasting city of nearly a million, still it retains a unique feeling of France between its fantastic square and the alleys of the old town. The old harbour is just what every harbour should be. Only too small for the request. Get lost on the Promenade des Anglais and the city centre. Eat at the oyster bars.

Antibes is another beautiful town-cum-citadel and makes a convenient base to explore inland, to Grasse and St. Paul de Vence and its citadel. The harbour is the biggest super yacht base in the Med, so you know what you can expect. Cap D'Antibes provides a couple of great bays for a relaxing stop and villa-snooping. The great one on the Cape was a set on several movies. There is also a couple of very convenient anchorages just S of the main harbour. Many recommended restaurants here. In case of good weather the best anchorage is at the SW end of the Cap itself, in front of a couple of very imposing villas.

Iles Lerins/Cannes. The world famous posh town of Cannes, besides being blessed by a great climate, location and a good film festival, has the unabashed luck to have two islands in front, themselves divided by a green and sheltered channel where hundreds of boats find good shelter and great location. The islands are national parks and boast a fort, a perfect monastery (still in use) and great treks to walk around under the umbrella of maritime pines. Anchorages: good holding but beware of the shallow areas right in the middle between the 2 islands. Access could be tricky at night. Another very nice option, and definitely less crowded, is to let go just N of the bigger Island to the N. Take care in the shallow banks between the islands and Cannes. Depending on your night habits, you can either sleep quietly in the bay or splurge in Cannes, rarely an idle place.

Rade D'Agay. This wide cove is conveniently situated between the long stretch between Cannes and St.Tropez. A good place to stop and rest between the livelier and fancier resorts. Recommended restaurants

St Tropez. Swim at midday under the bright red rocks of the Esterel then head for St. Tropez for a jet-set night among celebrities, old and nouveau riches, sky-high prices and fashionable discos. The town itself is still very cute and the harbour is a must see. Thank God the port authorities reserved an area for sailboats, otherwise it would be just a superyacht excess.

Port Cros. Considering that you'll leave St. Tropez late and almost certainly poorer and hangover, relax till 2 pm by the beaches between La Ramatuelle and Cap Camarat than do the effort to get to Port Cros, a Marine Reserve that stands out of the Riviera like Stanley Park in Vancouver. The shores are impressive, the water is pristine, the snorkelling rewarding. Port Man anchorage (43° 0'37.14"N, 6°24'48.85"E), although apparently bottomless, is well sheltered and seriously beautiful. Other good anchorages along the NE coast in the channel. Holding ground is not great, but Port Man is very well sheltered even from the Mistral. I just love Port Cros. Hike around the island. There are restaurants in the small village-ferry terminal.

Porquerolles is an island where you can spend a week, provided you find a place in the harbour or in the bays. The S coast is rugged and with just a Mistral-safe cove under the cliffs of E side. The northern shore deepens gently and creates two wide and spectacular bays, where there is no swell but the mistral can enter fiercely. It is easy to forecast and you can run to the other side of the channel for protection. A thing to do in Porquerolle is to rent a bike and get lost among the fields and vineyards of the island, making sure not to miss the lighthouse on the S coast, and enjoy the nightlife in and around the main square. Do not even hope to find a berth in the harbour in August

Toulon/St. Mandrier: not a bad spot to pick up crew and fill up the fridge, but somehow they managed to close down the fuel station... A pleasant anchorage off the Toulon main harbour, one feels safer here than in Porquerolles. Another interesting spot to visit is the Des Embiez island, at the W end of the peninsula S of Toulon

The Calanques is a group of deep inlets just west of the town of Cassis, miles W of Porquerolles. People usually rent a boat in Toulon or Nice, and they rarely get this W towards Marseille. The sailor will be rewarded by the very high, uninhabited and savage cliffs of the area. All in all one would prefer to sail just E of Toulon. Another con: the foolish frogs set up a buoy field, so no more free anchorage and a wide expanse of white balls to spoil the photo shot.

Marseille: ok, we all watched 'French Connection' with Popeye-Gene Hackman fighting the local mafia single-handed, and losing badly. Still this big city provides a spectacular, affordable harbour, an excellent selection of restaurants by the sea and a fashionable shopping zone. I had to admit life in Marseille is not too shabby.