



# OVERSEAS TRAVEL

## Treasure Hunting In St. Tropez By Susan Irving Monshaw

It's easy to overuse the words seductive and sensual to describe St. Tropez. Just the name conjures images of glamorous people tripping off their massive yachts to sit in the red chairs at the Café Sénéquier, and sip an Aperol spritz while a parade of sunburned tourists occasionally blocks their view. Perhaps it brings to mind glitzy nightclubs that don't even open their doors until midnight, where the admission requires one to wear a Gucci bralette and agree to purchase a gigantic bottle of top shelf champagne, even if you don't like the stuff.

There is so much more, my friends, to this mythical, beguiling port village on France's famed Cote D'Azur. You need only a decent pair of walking shoes to claim entry into the real essence of this famous fishing village turned vacation destination. Throughout the year, St. Tropez never fails to charm and seduce, though the easiest time to visit is May through to October. History, gastronomy, vistas and of course, wine, are only a few of the many treasures hidden on this sandy peninsula.

There are several ways to circumnavigate the village – we'll start with entry at the port. Whether you arrive by car or boat, you cannot miss the iconic saffron and honey bell tower of the 18th century Église de Notre Dame de L'Assomption, that dominates every image of St. Tropez. Stroll along the quay, stop to admire the original and collectible art

displayed by the talented locals, peer into the sumptuous yachts and antique sailboats moored there. Continue along to the top of the great jetty wall to gain the first of many mesmerising views of the Gulf of St. Tropez

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stretching out to the Mediterranean and the lovely coastal villages of Port Grimaud, Sainte Maxime and Les Issambres facing you. Far left, at the end of the jetty, the lighthouse installed in 1866, is covered in a contemporary art installation and still warns sea craft today of the dangerous rocks and outcroppings beneath the churning waves.

Turn right and up the hill to La Citadelle, the ancient fortress built in 1602, by King Henry IV, to defend the region from Spanish invaders. The site is open every day (with a few exceptions), and contains an excellent Maritime History Museum. When you've had your fill of cannons, donjons and dungeons, wander down the path in a northerly direction to the water where you'll find the Chemin des Graniers. Soon you'll come upon one of the coolest hidden treasures in town: the Cimetière de Marin St. Tropez, where seafarers, villagers and a few famous folks have been interred since 1791. Go slowly, and notice the elevated and ornate graves decorated with ceramic floral arrangements and weathered photographs of the dearly departed.

When you exit the cemetery, continue north on the same path, hugging the waterside, look for a set of stairs disappearing into the rocks down to the beach. At the bottom of these stairs is a prize reserved only for those intrepid travellers who step off the beaten path:

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La Plage Graniers. Here is a tiny beach (one of only a few on this side of the peninsula) with just a few rustic mats you can rent that sit directly on the sand. Tucked into the hillside is a bewitching, intimate restaurant serving fresh seafood and barbecued specialties, along with local wines. There is no thumping soundtrack delivered by an overenergetic DJ here, no smug waiters, and no overdressed customers posing for selfies. While the prices may not be a bargain, this is a true sensual delight – slide your bare feet into the sand, savour a bowl of tiny mussels swimming in garlic and white wine and a calm atmosphere, have another glass of rosé, and breathe deeply. Now you understand completely the French idea of taking the day (or even a few hours) off.

If you are coming to St. Tropez by land, you'll travel along D61 Route de Ramatuelle passing dozens of somnolent vineyards, each a painting in relief. This is a captivating and twisty drive any time of year, though summer and fall are the loveliest. An easy visit, and delightful wine tasting can be had at an adorable roadside stand in front of Domaine La Rouillere. Step up to the window bar and chat with the helpful, charming, English-speaking folks inside who will guide you in appreciating the pleasures of the region's famous rosés, and the soon to be discovered provençal reds, which are the perfect accompaniment to the region's tomato, basil and seafood heavy cuisine. If you're lucky, you are on your way to a reserved table at La Ferme Douceur, just a few minutes down this road. La Ferme is an enchanting gem, tucked into a vineyard where diners have only one important choice: red, white or rosé? The menu is set and different each evening, offered at a reasonable, fixed price, and positively delicious in every way, as the sun sets and the patio is illuminated showing off shapely, low fig trees, blooming pink laurels, and the grapevines stretching away into the

darkness. Keep an eye out for Irene, a friendly wild boar who might make a surprise visit to your table when the cheese course is served!

Follow D91 to the intersection of D93, also known as the Route des Plages, and head toward the famous Pampelonne beaches. If you're craving glitz and glam, this is the place. Along the Mediterranean side of St. Tropez, the glamorous beach clubs feature luxurious sunbeds to rent for a day of lounging, people watching and waiters slogging through the sand to deliver your drinks that will make you want to cry when the sun begins its descent. Most have excellent restaurants where you can enjoy an entire salt-encrusted fish taken directly from the sea before you, or perhaps a perfectly crispy, wood-fire oven pizza Reine (topped with delicate ham, sliced raw mushrooms and a single black olive), washed down by the ubiquitous rosé wine. You can even do a little souvenir shopping as the clubs also feature small shops where you can find a sexy swimsuit, jaunty hat or monogrammed beach towel. No bargains here, but an unforgettable experience indeed.

Speaking of shopping, one of the best reasons to visit St. Tropez is its famous outdoor market. Every Tuesday and Saturday throughout the year, the Place des Lices, at the village centre, is transformed from a parking lot and bocce court (known as boules to the locals), to a gigantic market filled with fresh everything: seasonal vegetables and fruits of all description, prepared foods and roasted chickens, aromatic olives, cheese, unique and funky clothing, pretty draperies and tablecloths, kitschy lavender souvenirs, antiques including furniture and jewellery, cashmere sweaters, you name it. This is where you'll find some bargains my dears, so please be sure to bring along an extra suitcase for all of the treasures.

On your way back to the port from the marché, you can lick the windows (French for window shopping) of the fabulously expensive shops along Rue Francois Sibilli, including names you recognise and some you don't. In this part of the village you can spy vestiges of its medieval roots. Look up to appreciate the shuttered windows slightly askew, the ponderous stone archways, and look down to navigate the tricky but gorgeous to look at, cobblestone streets, rising toward the citadel. In December,

Santa Claus, better known as Pere Noel, presides over a meticulously detailed reproduction of the village as it was, set up in the tiny church of Chapelle de la Misericorde on Rue Gambetta.

As you ascend, you'll find yourself following along the base of the original fortress wall. Tempting shops and restaurants will surely slow your progress to the ultimate lunch destination at Hotel Le Yaca. What looks to be a small entry opens into a grand reception room with marble floors and an impressive staircase beckoning you to come hither. Many charming details from the original 18th century home create a warm and welcoming ambiance. Ask for a table next to the pool where you can savour an Italian accented menu including an indulgent presentation of pasta mixed directly inside a huge wheel of Parmesan cheese. During the off season especially, the chic yet intimate bar is a great spot to take a breather and grab a hot cup of something, or a champagne cocktail delivered in an antique coupe.

A special time to be in St. Tropez is September, during the annual sailing yacht regatta, Les Voiles de St. Tropez. Hundreds of soaring sailboats fly across the gulf, towering over the tourist boat you can board for one of the most exciting rides of your life. There is a festive atmosphere in town as the sailing teams take over the restaurants and cafés, and there is a market catering to those mariners in need of super-high-powered binoculars, waterproof clothing and souvenir bags made from recycled sails.

Remember to greet shopkeepers with "bonjour", exit with a friendly "merci", keep your hand on your wallet in crowded places, and know that you've discovered some of the greatest travel gifts in the world when you follow the beach road to French nirvana, St. Tropez.

Images credit - Susan Monshaw

