

# France – Monaco, Provence, Languedoc

## PART 1

I've broken the trip into two sections. In the first, we spend time in Monaco and Nice. The second episode takes us to Avignon where we visit so many of the beautiful towns in the area. Enjoy the first instalment!

### Thursday – Day 1

We're away for 4 weeks this trip – France, then Spain, then India. This trip we are taking the opportunity to explore the southern coast, French Riviera, Provence and Languedoc.

We settle into the SIA lounge for the mandatory pre-departure champagne. We have a 2hr layover before our 11:30pm departure for Milan.

### Friday - Day 2

We land in Milan at 6am to a drab and rainy morning. It's still very dark as we exit the airport to board a shuttle to the central train station. We get there at 7am and it's still very dull..... drizzling rain and all round miserable.

Our train to Monaco doesn't leave until 9:10am so we sit down to read for a while. We have allocated seats on the train and are in a cabin, with two bench seats. The train is quite comfortable but I wonder, yet again, why everyone raves about the European train system, especially when disparaging the system we have at home. I understand the comparison to the fast, sleek trains you see in all the brochures but the reality is many of the trains are ordinary, such as this one.

The day gets lighter as we travel but not a whole lot brighter. We arrive in Genoa around 11'ish and it's teeming rain. There's a lot of rain lying around. We transfer trains at Ventimiglia, on the Italian/French border and barely make the connection. We are supposed to have 10 minutes to transfer but the first train is late (see, it's not just NSW) and we scamper down the ramp and back up another to make the train, with about 30 seconds to spare. The interior of the train is modern but decorated with random graffiti tags on every available surface.

It's only about another 20 minutes before we pull into Monaco station. While the train was ordinary the station is anything but. My research tells me that our hotel, the Novotel, is on a road perched way above the train station so we head 'up' on an escalator, followed by a lift, followed by another escalator, until we exit. We are slightly disorientated, as well as jet lagged, and Dave is suggesting we go right, while I'm trying to explain that the hotel is to the east of the train station, therefore we must go left. Dave asks the gendarme, who just happen to be close by and we go left.

The hotel is only a couple of blocks away..... a great location when toting ports and other paraphernalia. The check in is quick and the hotel is funky, with fabulous sculptures and neat furniture. I figure the rooms might be the letdown but no, the room is lovely and quite spacious (especially for Europe).



The weather is still gloomy but we decide we're going walking anyway. It's about 2pm and it's either drop on the bed or keep moving time, so we opt for the latter. It's a short walk down to the **Casino** and there's lots of people around. The casino and neighbouring **Hotel du Paris** are impressive, in a falling down rich and Russian mafia kind of way. We don't bother going into the casino – we might later (or not) but keep walking for now. There's a great view of the harbour and the boats look like they'd have a net worth of a small town. There is some serious money tied up (literally) in the harbour.

It's starting to rain lightly so we up the broly and continue. Dave is rather impressed with the F1 track and can recognise every bit of the course from the TV coverage. By the time we make the harbour, it's raining quite a bit so we walk under the cover of the shop fronts while admiring the flotilla. As soon as the rain eases we cross the road to get a better, up front view. These boats are larger than most houses..... and much more impressive. The outdoor furniture is enough to put us to shame, without thinking about the interiors.

After admiring the boats, we notice that the most prominent business along the street seems to be that of boat brokerage. At the poorer end of the market, the boats are around €3 million and at the other end, they're about €16 million. Then there's the POA boats..... I shudder to think.

It's about 4:30pm and we decide we'll eat when we see something suitable. The place is quiet with many shops closed for the winter (we assume). We come across a pizzeria a block or so back from the waterfront and it's open (seems like many places close after lunch and don't open again until dinner) so we go in and pull up a pew. The owner is a friendly chap and Dave notices that there is a plaque, behind my head, from the NY marathon. And another from the London marathon above it. Dave asks the owner if they are his – they are indeed. He's run 10 NY marathons. Dave and he have a chat about marathons, etc. It is only then I notice the name of the restaurant .... "Le Marathon."

We enjoy pizzas and a beer. Before feeling like we've just been hit by a bus. I want to lie down now and go to sleep. But we must get home. Luckily, it's easy, as we're near the entry to the train station so we just retrace our steps from earlier.

## Saturday – Day 3

We go down for breakfast and are pleasantly surprised at how comprehensive the spread is. Lots of fruit, a number of hot selections and the wonderful baguettes and bread the French are famous for, along with cheese and cold meats.

It's raining heavily as we eat breakfast and the forecast is for rain, rain and more rain for the next few days.

We walk up behind our hotel, into more local streets, for a look around. It's noticeably quiet and there are few people out and about. We only walk for a bit as we need to get back to the hotel and change for lunch.

Given we were "in the neighbourhood" Dave wanted to take the opportunity to visit the IAAF office, here in Monaco. On contacting them, Pierre Weiss (the IAAF General Secretary) invited us out to lunch. We have no idea who else is going, except that there will be other staff members there, but we're looking forward to catching up with Pierre. He is retiring shortly, after 25 years with the IAAF and will be sorely missed..... his knowledge of the sport is second to none and he is very hands on with everything that goes on. All this as well as being a lovely fellow.

The IAAF office is also quite close to the train station – the rain is holding off, just, so we dash down to the station, out the lower level and it's a 5 minute walk to the IAAF office.

We walk to the restaurant, again only about 5 minutes away (which is what happens in a country that is 2km long and 1km wide). We are lunching at **La Dolce Vita**, down on the harbour. Some of the staff are already there, including Pierre's successor, who has only arrived in Monaco this week. Essar (the new Gen.Sec) worked at the Sydney Olympics so we have some common ground. Pierre also relates to him the story of how "this couple saved the world half marathon championships," referring to a rather interesting time in Delhi in 2005 when, as Pierre put it, "all the money was spent on hospitality and nothing on the event!" And we thought it was only us that noticed. It's touching that with everything else that goes on, Pierre remembers that we "saved the event" ..... quite possibly right and, at the time, the story went viral on the internet, as we subsequently found out.

We enjoy a lovely lunch and, on leaving, the rain tumbles down again. We run back to the IAAF office, under the cover of our umbrella, and Pierre says he'll drop us back to the hotel. Pierre takes us on a quick tour of Monaco – only cars registered in Monaco (with 06 on their number plate) are permitted to go up to **Monaco Ville** where the palace is located and Albert and his happy bride are domiciled. There are police stationed at the bottom of the hill to prevent the tourists driving up there. We do a quick whip around, take in the view of the harbour and see the palace, as well as the church where Princess Grace and Prince Rainier are buried. It's a swanky part of town with views to die for.



Pierre tells us the train station is 14 stories from top to bottom and most levels are taken up by car parking. I'm glad we found the mechanical means of getting to the top!

We scoot around town, past the casino and, as we get near our hotel, Pierre explains that the French border is to our immediate right. You can tell by the footpaths.... see, the Monaco footpaths are beautifully finished.... now there's France..... rubbish footpaths! We thought that France might be up behind the city but no, it's right here, through the middle of the place.

Pierre drops us back and we say our goodbyes, hoping that we'll continue to see more of this very dear man in the future. The sport will be much worse off for his leaving.

The rain is easing again, so we pull on the walking shoes and head out once more. The clouds start to part and the sun comes out.... brilliant! We go back down the casino way, as we'll have a sticky beak inside..... not sure we'll bother going into the gaming rooms as there's a cover charge to do so and it's a casino, which interests us not in the least. They banned smoking in the gaming rooms of the casino in 1903.... doesn't seem to have impacted their revenue too much.



What does interest us is the line up of cars outside..... Maserati, Aston Martin, Bentley (so many Bentleys), Ferrari, Lambo, Porche and Mercs by the dozen. Car lover's paradise. Mostly late models.



Give it another 10 minutes and the rain is coming down again. Then it stops, so we continue walking around town. There's a F1 museum type place down on the waterfront that Dave wants to visit but when we get there it seems it's an F1 'club' and the doors are firmly locked.

We have noticed, while walking around, that every store has a photo of Prince Albert and his happy bride. All of them have the same photo. It would seem to be an act of treason to not have the royal photo displayed.

We return to our hotel room.... and get changed for dinner. We don't need much and go back down the waterfront, via a different route that wends around the laneways before dropping down via many steps. We find a nice little Italian, **L'Escale**, and opt to sit outside, under the protection of very thick plastic walls and a solid roof. Just as well, as the rain teems down again. Part of the area leaks and water floods down the walls but it doesn't affect us in the least.

The view would have been a whole lot better if the carnival weren't in town.... it's set up right along the waterfront, blocking the view of the gin palaces out front.

By the time we leave, the rain seems to be easing but then dumps down again. We make it to the train station without getting too wet and, by the time we exit the top level the rain has stopped again.

## **Sunday – Day 4**

What a wild night! The rain bucketed down all night, the wind blew and the thunder roared.

We peer out the window at the torrential rain over breakfast and contemplate when we might make the break to get down to the rental vehicle office, on the harbour front. We're picking up a car today and heading off to Nice. Again, the rain eases and we keep dry on the way to the Avis office. Once inside, we watch the rain tumble down again! Seems like dodging the rain is going to be a pattern for us.

The lovely Avis lady tells us we have an 'upgraded' vehicle. We hate it when they 'upgrade' us as it inevitably means a big car that we never wanted. In the country where small cars are *de rigueur*, we have a German Holden. Pas bon (not good). And it's a diesel..... it sounds like a tractor and looks about the same. Dave asks if we can swap the car in Nice..... no problems, I will phone my colleague. Avis lady agrees it's a nuisance car and is quite apologetic.

Off we tootle and the rain comes down again. One of the world's most beautiful drives is reduced to a grey dullness. **Nice** is only a short 30km away and we're there in no time, despite trying to waste as much time as possible taking diversions along the way.

Nice airport is on the other side of town and we go out there to change our vehicle. The Avis lady here is also quite sympathetic, saying that the car we have is ok in America or Australia but not here. So..... everyone agrees that the car is far too large .... makes you wonder why they have them to start with! We swap for a very neat Citroen C3..... how very French. Much more our size and style.

We arrive at our accommodation, **Villa Killauea**, in the hills behind Nice, early afternoon. It is gorgeous, with views down the valley, no one within cooee and no other guests in house. Our room, the **Rose Room**, is spacious and the bathroom even more so. Our host, Nathalie, is welcoming and friendly, and shows us the pool room where we take breakfast and can utilise the facilities – there's a computer, books, tea and coffee, etc. All the comforts of home. Nathalie is helpful with what we should see and do and suggests we go into Nice, to the old town, this afternoon, where we can find a place for dinner as well.

We have a cup of tea and relax for a bit before jumping in the C3 and buzzing off up the hills. It's a beautiful drive and we end up at **Asprement**, which is quiet and incredibly beautiful, with views down towards the river raging below. We walk upwards through the village and enjoy the peace and quiet. It's nippy but the rain holds off again, so we're happy.

We head back, checking out any possibilities for dinner on the way. So many places are closed so we continue into Nice and find a bistro in a local neighbourhood, **Le Magnan**. It's a trendy sort of place and the owner is seated at one of the tables, partaking in a vino, eagle eyes watching every move of the staff. We order a salad and it is divine..... witlof, lettuce, fennel, pine nuts, goat's cheese and a great honey mustard dressing. Followed by pizza.

## Monday – Day 5

Today, we're off to the mountains. Nathalie has recommendations and they echo the research I've done. She tells us about a lolly factory that we must visit..... duly noted. It's bright and sunny, with scattered cloud. We can see the mountains to the north and they are blanketed with snow.

Our first stop is **Vence**. We park and wander down the main street, which is reasonably uninspiring until we take a left turn through an archway. We find a wonderful 'old town' of meandering streets, which we follow around. There are lots of shops but many of them are closed.

Onto **St Paul**.... what a find. A beautiful, walled village, with amazing art galleries and shops.



The buildings in these villages are simply beautiful..... solid stone walls, wooden doors, small windows, bright flowers. Speaking of which, I have never seen so many cyclamens..... stunningly beautiful in pink, red and white..... everywhere. The perfect flower for this climate, obviously.

Onto **Pont du Loup**, a picturesque spot where the river is flowing violently through the middle of town. We call into **Florian**, the lolly shop, and are not disappointed. They specialise in making goods (mostly lollies) using fruit and flower flavourings. We sample some goods.... boiled lollies (so good), chocolate covered orange peel, crystallised petals (lavender, verbena and rose, wonderful for dropping in champagne), jellies (of the lolly variety) and jams. We purchase some jellies and I then notice the flavoured caramels..... or fudge. Got to have some!

Whilst in town we look up and see a village perched seemingly precariously on top of the mountain above. I recall Nathalie mentioning Gourdon and the views across the Riviera and I realise.... there it is! We take the turn, 13km to Gourdon, and enjoy one of the most beautiful drives through a riot of autumnal colours. It reminds me of Vermont, in the US, with the bright colours of autumn everywhere.

We arrive in **Gourdon**, just before sunset and what a prize. The most stunning village with views from Nice, in the east, to Cannes and beyond in the west. We are probably 500m in altitude and the beauty of the place is overwhelming..... absolutely breathtaking. I wish we were staying here the night.



We make our way back down the mountain and, by the time we get back towards Nice, the evening traffic is building up and the rain is again upon us. It takes us about an hour and a half to get home, where we shower and head out to a local restaurant. The area we are in is **Colomar** and Nathalie has recommended a local spot for dinner, **Auberge du Redier**, and it's about 10 minutes down the road, within a hotel.

The restaurant is quite large and the menu is a la carte as well as a set price menu. Nathalie has recommended the ravioli with cepes (mushroom) and we both have this for entree. Unbelievably good and like nothing we've ever had before. I have duck to follow and Dave has veal kidneys. Dessert is included so I have crème caramel and Dave has strawberry tart. The bill is so reasonable, we're surprised. And the waiter keeps striking things off.... the bill is reduced twice by the time we get our change.

On leaving the rain is just starting. Once more, we've dodged it.

## **Tuesday – Day 6**

The rain bucketed down and the wind blew a gale. All night long. But this morning it's bright, with quite a bit of sun but a cold wind and scattered clouds.

I peruse the Riviera Times over breakfast – there's an article on the famous locals, Brad and Ange, Johnny Depp, Tina Turner, Danielle Steel, Elton John, Roman Abramovich. A fabulous item is headed "World's most costly car pileup?" .... a woman driving her €285,000 Bentley Azure ploughed into a few other cars in the Casino Square.... most notably a Merc, a Ferrari, and Aston Martin and a Porsche where she managed to do €125,000 worth of damage. "Hundreds of tourists captured the moment on film, before the driver and her two passengers were rescued by a police officer." You can just picture it!



We head off in the direction of Monaco. Along the waterfront in Nice, it is evident that the big seas have broken over the wall - the walkway and road are very wet. The waves are crashing down along the **Promenade des Anglais** and there are people everywhere, taking photos and simply staring at the ocean (or sea as it is in this case). The beach has been washed up across the walkway as well – back home this would be sand but here it's quite sizable pebbles all over the place.

The good news is the sky has broken and the sun is beaming down. The temp gauge in the car shows 19 degrees and the colour of the Med is as you expect.... a beautiful blue aqua, although rough around the edges as the waves crash to shore.

We make our way to **Villafranche Sur-Mer** before taking a left and heading upwards, on our way to **Eze**, which sits on a pinnacle 427m above sea level. We take the **Moyenne Corniche** – the Corniches (coastal roads) stretch between Menton and Nice and they provide amazing views of the coastline. There are three of them – the **Corniche Inferieure**, which basically runs along the coast; the **Moyenne Corniche** which is the middle coastal road and the **Grand Corniche**, which skims along the top of the mountains behind the coast.



**Eze** is a beautiful town with the medieval village perched above. There is only one gated entry to the village and we climb upwards. What a view! The coast stretches out to the east and west and the villages below seem like dots in the distance. The wind is blowing an absolute gale up here and whistles through the alleyways that house galleries and arty shops.

We continue the climb in Eze, until we reach the succulent garden, the **Jardin Eze**. It costs €5 to enter and is worth every penny. The garden seems so familiar and I realise this is where many of the photos of the French Riviera are taken – especially the one with the statue in the foreground. It is a magical place ..... the wind is so strong but the temperature is lovely and we're sporting t-shirts only. I can see bad weather rolling in across the Med but it's difficult to tell how far away it is.



We drive back down the mountain and onto **St-Jean-Cap-Ferrat**, hideaway enclave of the rich and famous. There are huge houses on huger blocks, with ornate gardens and quite a bit of maintenance going on in the off season. The place is a bit like a ghost town apart from the odd Maserati, Audi and Merc that pass by. We wanted to visit the **Villa Ephrussi de Rothschild** but it's closed during the week at this time of year.

We drive back to Nice and go to the old town for lunch. **La Voglia**, an Italian restaurant, takes our fancy and we find it is quite popular. Our waiter tells us the speciality of the day is grilled seafood – calamari, gamberi (prawn), salmon, snapper and sardine, served with salad..... €12. Sounds like a bargain and we both take this option. The meal is divine.... given pizzas are €14, this seems so cheap.

We head back towards home, only to find further chaos on the roads. We circle around town, get back onto the Promenade and take a slow journey through the traffic. Once we get through the city and turn off for home, the traffic clears and we have a free run up the mountain.

We settle in for a quiet evening. Having had lunch, we are in no need of food and a cup of tea does the trick just fine. The rain seems to have settled in for the time being.

## Wednesday – Day 7

Once again, it rained steadily during the night. The morning is looking a wee bit damp but I'm sure it will fine up!

We meet Nathalie's husband Gerard on our way to breakfast. Lovely chap. We discuss our plans for the day – we're going to drive to **Menton** (up near the Italian border) on one of the Corniche then back on another. We were thinking of heading to the mountains but decided we really should do one of the world's best drives instead. We will keep the mountain trip for later in the week when we tackle Mont Ventoux!

The rain is steadily coming down so we wait in the room for a bit, until it eases. Down on the Promenade, the water is an amazing shade of aqua and there's black clouds threatening on the horizon.



We're driving to **Menton** on the **Moyenne** (middle) **Corniche** and take the turnoff to Eze, as we did yesterday. The rain is trying to come down but so far so good, although the sky is very black in the rear view mirror.

The drive along the Corniche is stunning and the trip to Menton doesn't take long. It's a pretty spot and we have a quick walk around, spotting a lone surfer going in for a boogy board.



We head only a little further east and, lo and behold, we're in **Ventimiglia**.... Italy. We've been in three countries already today and it's not even lunch time! We turn back and head for the hills, also known as the **Grande Corniche**. Just when you think the views can't improve.... they do. We stop every so often to peer over the edge of the road.



We arrive at **La Turbie** around lunch time. It's a quiet spot with occasional passing traffic from the tourists travelling the Corniche. We find a nice local restaurant, **La Regence**, and enjoy Chevre (goat's cheese) salad and pizza. Fabuleux!



Onward we trek, stopping here and there to take in the views. Snow capped mountains to the north, the Med to the south, magical villages dotting the coastline.

We keep driving west.... Dave has decided we might go to Cannes. The traffic is building up and it will take hours to get back from Cannes, so we turn back after a while and return home.

Cup of teatime after another great day's touring.

Stay tuned next instalment when we continue onto Avignon, where we stay at a gorgeous B&B, which sits on an island in the middle of the Rhone River. How very Tom Sawyer!