

A large stone archway monument in Marseille, France, with a statue in the center and a building in the background. The archway is made of reddish-brown stone and has a large opening. The statue is a dark, abstract figure with arms raised. The building in the background is a simple, rectangular structure with a red roof. The sky is a clear, light blue.

# MEMORABLE MARSEILLE AND THE FRENCH RIVIERA

Text and photos by Dr Juliana Poh



**MARSEILLE**, the second largest city in France, sits on the Mediterranean coast and is hence the perfect base camp to explore the Provence-Alpes-Cote d'Azur region. I visited Marseille with my colleagues in September last year, and the weather was almost perfect, except for the strong winds.

We first took off to Cannes by the SNCF high-speed rail, and spent a night in this town world-famous for its annual film festival. After our train ordeal en route to Cannes, shopping along the street of Rue d'Antibes and strolling by the Croisette Beach by sunset was exciting yet calming. Dinner was at the oldest restaurant in the town, Auberge Provencale, which turned out to be a pleasant experience with a live band and an attentive waiter. The highlight of the night had to be the unexpected display of fireworks that we watched excitedly from a supermarket near our hotel. Enquiring about the occasion, I received the reply, "This is Cannes!" from a local, who went on to explain that there are frequent fireworks displays, even outside the fireworks festival period. Impressive.

We had a smooth drive past Nice on our way to Monaco, which is the second smallest and most densely populated country in the world. Monaco is also famous for its Formula 1 (F1) racetrack – the shortest, but most prestigious and demanding track in F1 history. Our guide told us that the track doesn't meet current F1 safety requirements, and would not have been permitted in the Grand Prix if it hadn't already been a part of it. Our mini bus driver simulated the race experience on the track, including the sharp Fairmont Hairpin turn, and it was simply exhilarating! No wonder the hotel rates go up to 2,000 euros (\$3,470) per night at this location during the F1 races! After visiting the tombs of Prince Rainier and Princess Grace (Kelly), we spent some time just standing around the terrace outside Casino de Monte-Carlo, with refreshing sorbets in hand, admiring the numerous gleaming Ferraris and Bentleys passing by. Who cares whether the drivers are money launderers or true high rollers!

A three-hour train ride back to Marseille was a good way to wind down from happening Monaco. Marseille is also known as the soap capital of France. They have been producing *savon de Marseille* ("soap of Marseille"), a traditional soap, using vegetable oils for about 600 years. It was simply amazing to see the soap (made of a mixture of Mediterranean seawater and olive oil) presented in all shapes, sizes and colours at the bustling







Les Artisanales du Vieux-Port (Craft Market). The shopper in me was completely spoiled for choice.

Every visitor to Marseille will check out Vieux-Port, or the Old Port, to admire the sights and sounds of France's largest commercial port. The smell of the sea (and fish) hits you as you step out of the train at the underground metro station. Here, fishermen sell their catch mostly in the mornings, to locals and restaurants in the port area. Mediterranean fish are the key ingredients for the signature Marseille dish bouillabaisse, a must-try! I had mine for 59 euros from Restaurant l'Hippocampe at the Vieux-Port. This traditional Provençal fish stew uses at least three kinds of fish, usually monkfish, red mullet, Conger eel, sea robin or rockfish, and may include seafood like langoustine or mussels (additional charges apply, of course). In Marseille, the broth is served first in a bowl containing the bread and rouille, with the seafood and vegetables served separately in another bowl or on a platter. This dish is absolutely tasty and filling, but be careful of the bones!



I had my first taste of pastis at Nul Part Ailleurs, an excellent waterfront place for French cuisine, ranked 26 out of more than 900 Marseille restaurants on TripAdvisor.com. Pastis, an anise-flavoured liqueur, contains 45% alcohol by volume, so imagine the shock of the locals from the next table when I ignorantly took a sip of that potent drink neat! I quickly diluted the rest of it with cold water, and the resulting cocktail went very well with my garlic-baked mussels. Oops, and yum!



We spent half a day taking the Le Petit Train along the Corniche du President JF Kennedy to see St Victor's Abbey, visited Castellane's main square, and ended up at Notre-Dame de la Garde cathedral. The cathedral is located at the highest natural point in Marseille, offering the best views of the scenic old port and surroundings. I would also strongly recommend taking a half-day walk around the Old Town at the Panier area north of the old port, where much history lies. We visited the Vieille Charite, a 17th-century poorhouse built for children, the elderly and the homeless. Other must-sees are the InterContinental Hotel Dieu, built on the site of a hospital dating from the Middle Ages, and the magnificent Cathedrale de la Major. A walk around Panier inevitably brings you back to the Vieux-Port, after passing the modern Musee des Civilisations de l'Europe et de la Mediterranee, an architectural art piece overlooking the Mediterranean Sea.





No visit to one of the two European Capitals of Culture for 2013 would be complete without visiting its museums. We were lucky that the Le Grand Atelier du Midi was being held at the newly renovated Musee des Beaux Arts in the Palais Longchamp. The amazing exhibition showcased the masters who made their mark in southern France, including Renoir, Matisse and van Gogh. It was 16 euros well spent!

I had heard all about *The Count of Monte Cristo*, and planned to steal some time to tour the Chateau d'If, which has been likened to Alcatraz. The main character of this novel, Edmond Dantes, escaped after 14 years of imprisonment from that island fortress and was the only person to have ever done so in the story. I was terribly disappointed that the rough weather forced boat operators to cancel daily visits to the Chateau during the time we were there (including boat strikes on two days), so I had to settle for a ride to the other part of the Frioul islands on the last day of our trip. Thankfully, the islands were beautiful! The coastal walk gave picturesque views of the Chateau d'If and the city, with howling winds and cloudless blue skies to boot. A meal of hot fish soup and mussels at the Frioul port wrapped up our trip to the islands nicely.

Thanks for the memories, Marseille, till we meet again! **SMA**

#### Photos

1. The Corniche du President JF Kennedy memorial at sunset
2. The 16-euro seafood platter at Toinou restaurant – a must-try!
3. Inside the Vieille Charite
4. A simple but extremely tasty lemon tart!
5. Luscious tomatoes from the daily market at Castellane
6. The magnificent Cathedrale de la Major
7. Standing at the foot of Palais Longchamp
8. Visiting the bustling daily fish market at Vieux-Port
9. Savouring potent pastis, but diluted with cold water!
10. An interesting mural in Cannes
11. Enjoying seared duck at the oldest restaurant in Cannes, Auberge Provencale
12. A bird's eye view of Cannes
13. The grand Notre-Dame de la Garde cathedral



*Dr Poh is a part-time emergency physician, full-time mother, who dabbles in research, education and clan work, leaving no time to spare.*

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