The **Côte d’Azur** polarizes opinion like few places in France. To some it remains the most glamorous of all Mediterranean playgrounds; to others, it’s an overdeveloped victim of its own hype. Yet at its best – in the gaps between the urban sprawl, on the islands, in the remarkable beauty of the hills, the impossibly blue water after which the coast is named and in the special light that drew so many artists to paint here – it captivates still. The ancient city of [**Marseille**](https://www.roughguides.com/destinations/europe/france/the-cote-dazur/marseille/)possesses its own earthy magnetism, while right on its doorstep there’s swimming and sailing in the pristine waters of the [**Calanques national park**](https://www.roughguides.com/destinations/europe/france/the-cote-dazur/calanques/). To the east the family resorts of [**La Ciotat**](https://www.roughguides.com/destinations/europe/france/the-cote-dazur/la-ciotat-2/) and [**St Raphaël**](https://www.roughguides.com/destinations/europe/france/the-cote-dazur/frejus-and-around/st-raphael/), sedate **[Hyères](https://www.roughguides.com/destinations/europe/france/the-cote-dazur/hyeres-and-around/" \o "Hyères and around)** and Roman **[Fréjus](https://www.roughguides.com/destinations/europe/france/the-cote-dazur/frejus-and-around/" \o "Fréjus and around)** hold their own in the face of huge media hype, while true Mediterranean magic is to be found in the scented vegetation, silver beaches, secluded islands and medieval perched villages like [**Grimaud**](https://www.roughguides.com/destinations/europe/france/the-cote-dazur/massif-des-maures/grimaud/)and [**La Garde Freinet**](https://www.roughguides.com/destinations/europe/france/the-cote-dazur/massif-des-maures/la-garde-freinet/). You can escape to the wonderful unspoilt landscapes of the **[Îles d’Hyères](https://www.roughguides.com/destinations/europe/france/the-cote-dazur/hyeres-and-around/iles-dhyeres/" \o "Îles d’Hyères)**, with some of the best flora and fauna in Provence, then contrast the beachcomber charm of La Croix Valmer with the flashy ebullience of its overhyped neighbour, [**St-Tropez**](https://www.roughguides.com/destinations/europe/france/the-cote-dazur/st-tropez/) – unmissable if only for a day-trip, though you need to be prepared to contend with huge crowds in summer. Once an inhospitable shore with few natural harbours, the seventy-odd kilometres of the Riviera between [**Cannes**](https://www.roughguides.com/destinations/europe/france/the-cote-dazur/cannes-around/) and **[Menton](https://www.roughguides.com/destinations/europe/france/the-cote-dazur/menton/" \o "Menton)** blossomed in the nineteenth century as foreign aristocrats began to winter in the region’s mild climate. In the interwar years the toffs were gradually supplanted by new elites – film stars, artists and writers – and the season switched to summer. Nowadays, the Riviera is an uninterrupted sprawl of hotels, serried apartment blocks and secluded villas, with liner-sized yachts bobbing at anchor. Attractions remain, however, notably in the legacies of the artists who stayed here: Bonnard, Picasso, Léger, Matisse, Renoir and Chagall. [**Nice**](https://www.roughguides.com/destinations/europe/france/the-cote-dazur/nice/) has real substance as a major city, while [**Monaco**](https://www.roughguides.com/destinations/europe/france/the-cote-dazur/monaco/) intrigues visitors with its tax-haven opulence and comic-opera independence. The months to avoid are July and August, when room prices soar, overflowing campsites become health hazards and locals get short-tempered, and November, when many museums, hotels and restaurants close.