

**Y**acht-clogged harbours, all-night casinos, designer shopping... The glamour and glitz associated with Monte Carlo, Cannes and Saint-Tropez is just half the story. On the western stretch of the crescent-shaped coastline that forms the Côte d'Azur, between Toulon and Marseille, lies a different world of sun-drenched shores and age-old fishing villages with a character all of their own. Cassis, the most famous town here, is the jewel in the crown, but there are hidden gems aplenty, and travellers looking for some relaxed fun in the sun have more than enough to choose from here for an unforgettable adventure.

As the home of the French navy, industrial Toulon is not a place most people would think of for a summer holiday. But a 10-minute ferry ride from the city's busy harbour drops you in tiny Saint-Mandrier-sur-Mer on the Var, a jagged peninsula that juts out into the Mediterranean, whose 25 miles of coastline feature fishing harbours, secret coves, boundless sandy beaches, gorgeous turquoise waters, prime woodlands and an archipelago of tiny islands virtually unknown to tourists outside France.

You don't have to arrive via Toulon, but those who do head straight to Saint-Mandrier for its sprawling white-sand beaches - Les Sablettes, Bain-Arle and Cassis - facing a typically turquoise sea. But before you settle down to sunbathing, spend an hour or two strolling around the charming fishing villages' compact port, framed on three sides by steep, wooded hills.

Down the coastline, and reachable only by bike or on foot in July and August, a well-maintained footpath extends from Saint-Mandrier all the way to Saussey-sur-Mer, and



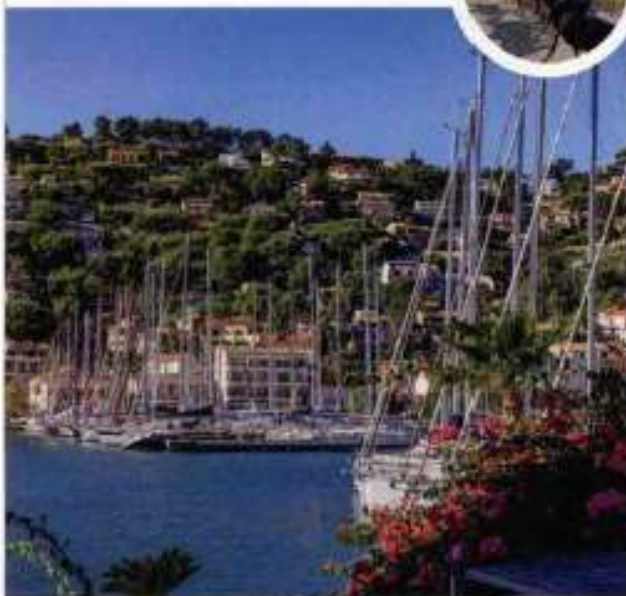
you can hop on and off at any point in between.

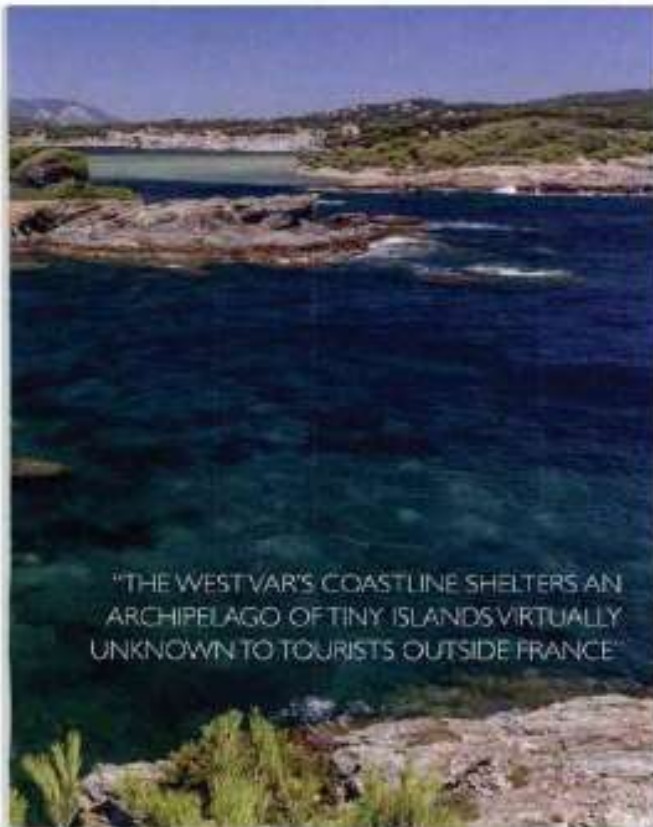
Intrepid hikers will not want to miss Cap-Sicré at the tip of the peninsula, within the protected Cap-Sicré national forest. Rising to 1,250 feet at its summit, the cape offers stupendous views of the Var and the entire Provence coastline. On the way up, you'll be studied by Aleppo pines and towering oaks and pine firs and cedars as they catch the thermal breezes.

#### **THE EMBEZ ARCHIPELAGO**

Five principal islands at the western tip of the peninsula make up the Embiez archipelago: Le des Embiez, Petit and Grand Rousseau, and Petit and Grand Gaux. The largest, Les Embiez, was purchased by Paul Ricard, the inventor of pastis, the white liqueur synonymous with Provence, in 1958. Ricard was an early environmentalist and used his vast fortune to secure several islands to preserve their spectacular plant and wildlife species. Wild Embiez has many claims to fame: Ricard, its port, a luscious among international yachtsmen, divers and snorkelers, as well as its pristine pine forests, hidden coves, crystalline waters and 25 acres of vineyards producing AOC whites, reds and rosés.

Embiez is also home to the conservation-minded Paul Ricard Oceanographic Institute, whose mission is "to know the sea and to protect it." There are no





"THE WESTVAR'S COASTLINE SHELTERS AN ARCHIPELAGO OF TINY ISLANDS VIRTUALLY UNKNOWN TO TOURISTS OUTSIDE FRANCE"



Clockwise from above: Entelles Island, sea looking the picture view of Giens, the picturesque port of Sanary, and the flower market at Saint-Maximin; Cap-Soleil on Ile-Rousse; Cap-Audoubert beach at Saint-Martin; not quite the Côte d'Azur as we usually imagine it.



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automobiles on the island, but visitors are free to traverse its six miles of coastal trails, bird sanctuary, beaches and hidden coves.

The two tiny parishes of Port and Grand Gou, reachable by foot or a small train from Port-de-Bouc on the mainland, make for an idyllic afternoon in the sun on beaches where you can easily find yourself quite alone. Back on the mainland, from Cap-Nègre it's a hop to luxury car-ster, whose postcard-perfect port, lined with elegant, stone-faced buildings draws the summer crowds. In spring and autumn the town empties out and you can join the locals at the Wednesday portable market without a crush of tourists, dine lazily in a waterfront café then stroll along the pretty squares.

The port itself is small and in a single afternoon you can explore its main attractions: the baroque murals of 18th-century *Saint-Nazaire* church, a 13th-century tower and wind-drying maceans, and the 105 traditional boats, all of them listed historical monuments, that are moored at the port.



Arrived with a map from the tourist office, you can also visit the town's many chapels or rise and set chapels. But if you only visit one, make it Notre-Dame-de-Pitié, at the far eastern edge of the port, well worth the uphill climb for its lovely setting and panoramic views of the bay.

From Sanary, you can walk the two and a half miles over the coastal path to Baudou, enjoying sweeping views along the way, or hop on a bus if you're not traveling by car. Though not as picturesque a port as Sanary, from Baudou a 10-minute ferry ride lands you on the Île de Beaufort, which was also bought by Paul Ricard. In contrast to the wild nature of the Île des Embiez, this islet is quiet, small, and traversable in an hour. You can visit an artisan's colony and purchase its wares, stroll along a seaside path, refresh at a wine bar, food truck or upscale restaurant, then stay overnight in one of several luxury villas with views over the bay to Baudou, or at the Delta hotel. The island is open only in the summer months so expect crowds, unless you go late in the season.

Wine is perhaps Baudou's biggest claim to fame; its red and rosé were sought after long before Provence became a serious player on the French wine scene. Domaine Tempier's prestige estate works with and sells the same old Cépages produces excellent red and rosé wines at affordable prices. But there are... ☺



**Cassises from top left:** Cassis, the Côte d'Azur without the main crowds looking on over Cassis harbor; the vineyard here produces a wonderfully crisp white wine; rock pool overlooking a view, public landing at La Fontaine; view over Cassis town in summer; you will find quiet streets, the aroma of a limestone coastline

many other notable vineyards that will take you inland past some sleepy villages worth stopping in or staying overnight, as they are also the setting for two of Provence's top five star-rated hotels with Michelin star dining: Le Castellet (Hôtel & Spa du Castellet) and La Colline d'Azur (Hôtel/Spa de l'Azur & Spa).

Out of season, visitors can almost imagine the sleepy fishing village Cassis once was. Fishermen still lower their boats in the harbor to display the daily catch.

At any of the cafés lining the port you can dine on the local *escabeche* – freshly caught sea urchins, shelled open and served with a drizzle of grey olive oil and a squeeze of lemon, to be savored out with bread and accompanied by a crisp, white Cassis wine. Such a treat is hard to find outside Provence – or even Cassis. Sheltered by the fiery red Cap Cassis (the highest limestone cliff in Europe) towering dramatically above the town, and its foothills sloping to the sea, Cassis's micro-climate brings to the wine a delicate salinity from the salt air and a pleasant minerality bolstered by the limestone soil.

Gourmeters appreciate Cassis's mouthwatering dining scene. Quayside bistros offer the catch of the day or local specialties. In two star-rated hotels, the local view, and Villa Maude, Daniel Brémond's Michelin-starred restaurant and lounge set on a hillside, is known as much for its truly superb seafood as for its breathtaking views over the bay.

Strolling around town, dodging in and out of boutiques or lingering on the sprawling white sand

## "THE MICRO-CLIMATE OF CASSIS BRINGS TO THE WINES A DELICATE SALINITY"

beaches that flank the harbor, are the kinds of easy pleasures that bring French holidaymakers back to Cassis year after year. The town's other claim has more to do with its privileged setting within the Parc National des Calanques.

Hidden like little slices of paradise among the tall cliffs lining the Cassis coastline all the way to Marseille, dozens of astonishingly blue calanques can be explored on foot or by boat. There is no access by car unless you're willing to park and walk a couple of hours. From Cassis, boat-lined Port-Bouc is the easiest to reach via a fairly easy 30-minute hike from the town center. A half-hour further leads you to Port-Pin. The prettiest of the three, requires a more vigorous walk an hour beyond Port-Pin. All offer the unmissable contrast of glittering turquoise water between plunging cliffs and white sand beaches.

There are many calanques between Cassis and Marseille, and if you plan on hiking you will need to pick up a map at the tourist office at the eastern edge of the quay near the beach. You can also join one of the many two- to five-hour boat trips from Cassis harbor through the calanques, some with stops, others just for the view.



The calanques' rare and fragile ecosystem is rigorously protected by the French parks system, and you will need to check weather conditions before setting out anywhere in the park. During the furious winds of the mistral, which can whip up at any time of year, the park is closed.

For the absolute best views, hike or drive up the Route des Calanques, at the edge of Cassis, which connects at the top of San Casselle - where there is a lookout point and parking - and continues along the coastline.

#### VINEYARD TOURS

A tour of the vineyards surrounding Cassis offers a gentle walk or an ideal bike ride. Clos Sainte-Magnévène, gorgeously set between the foothills of the rock and the sea, is a good place to start. And tasting here is a delight, as these graceful organic whites and rosés are some of the region's best. Other top wineries to visit are Domaine du Bagnol, Domaine de la Ferme Blanche, Domaine du Patruel and Château de Fontvieille. A party room provides on Thursday evenings at the Clos d'Alard, where tastings are accompanied by a live band. Or you can sample all the wines at La Maison des Vins, a short trip out of town.

Cassis train station is reachable from Paris with a connection in Marseille (TGVs) or a direct, four-hour train ride from Paris). I would highly recommend a stop in Marseille to explore its urban beaches and calanques and for the city's fabulous cultural, shopping and dining scenes. **22**