

# Getting around the Côte d'Azur

By Rich Brasher

Hiking to panoramic promontories on a path of dirt or laid stone, emerging from a bower of pines and pittosporum to unexpected vistas, and analyzing stairways from pathway to Mediterranean's edge as an awestruck engineer, I knew this was why I was here. My solo trip of eight days to the Côte d'Azur was a quest for hikes, gardens, architecture, culture, and urban design. To gain intimate familiarity with the region, my explorations were confined to the 15 miles of stunning coastline between Nice Côte d'Azur airport and Roquebrune-Cap-Martin just east of Monaco. Whether by foot, bus, tram, or train, the Côte d'Azur facilitates getting around amidst its astounding natural beauty, substantial architecture, varied history, and welcoming culture.

Founded by Greek seafarers about 350 BC, this capital of the Alpes-Maritimes, a department of the Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur region of France, is layered with cultural nuance from the centuries of shifting dominance by Greece, Italy, Great Britain, and Paris. Street signs are in both Niçois (or Niçard) and French. Niçois is argued to be a dialect of either Occitan or Ligurian origin. Given its proximity to the contemporary Italian border and the ebb and flow of cultures along this stretch of the Mediterranean, that is no surprise.

A bird's eye view of the city from the Colline du Château (Castle Hill) reveals the clear demarcation between Old Town Nice and New Town Nice by the trace of the Paillon River. Once the divider of the old and new city sectors, the river is now capped in its lowest reaches to unite the city with the linear open space of the Promenade du Paillon. Within this ribbon lie numerous cultural facilities; an enormous hardscaped plaza with a grid of pop-jet fountains, highly amenitized areas of hardscape and greenscape, and the sleek Nice Tramway. The promenade is anchored near the sea by the Place Massena. Here is where the population gathers for cultural events and celebrations within the city's "living room".

A brief look at non-automotive ways to get around this azure coast reveals this range of options:

## Train

SNCF is the state-owned railway company and operates most of the passenger and freight traffic in France, including the high-speed TGV network and the cleverly named Ouigo that provides low-cost interregional passenger connecting Nice to the rest of Europe. Local rail service provides easy connections both along the coast and inland to the towns of the Maritime Alps.

## Tram

The local network of tram and bus routes is operated by Lignes d'Azur, making local transit easier with a common ticket valid on both modes. From a single tram line serving 21 stations today, service will be expanding to four tram lines serving 70 stations by 2030. The expansion of the system with a line to the harbor is currently under construction. The tram system is well-integrated into the fabric of the city, taking advantage of the linear greenway of the Promenade du Paillon and with its discreet intrusion through the Place Massena where only ribbons of bollards and the unobtrusive tracks interrupt the otherwise seamless and grand gathering space.

## Bus

The Lignes d'Azur bus network is extensive and efficient, with the Route 100 running along the coast from Nice to Monaco and Menton as one of the most popular.

This route also provides a great perspective on the region's character of development; from the intensity and density of Monaco, to the consistent mid-rise building heights of Nice, and to the open space vistas and hillside villas of Èze and Cap d'Ail between the two urban centers. Contrary to San Diego, hillside development in this region is a necessity and is encouraged. Buildings appear much more "of the land" and substantial in their materials, coloring, and construction. The character of the land has not been engineered away to fit conventional construction, rather construction is tailored to the site resulting in the coastline's distinct character in the interplay of the natural and the built environments. Roadways hug both coastal edge and cliff, through tunnels and beneath reverse cut slopes in the rock where netting anchored into the cliff face contains the wayward rocks that spall from the surface.

Purchasing a pass for 10 bus or tram trips can lower the cost of this fascinating 10-mile coastline bus ride to 1€. Not bad for an E-ticket ride. Traffic congestion can result in intermittent service delays with headway times increasing from the planned 15 minutes to nearly an hour. More consistent headway is achieved within the city center through the many dedicated bus lanes along secondary streets where they are less impacted by competition with vehicular traffic.

Anomalies in service may occur, such as my case where the bus driver declared a stop in Monaco as the end of the line for that particular bus, rather than beyond to the published route termination. Being stranded in Monaco is not bad, but it is a tough way to learn Monaco's bus system is independent of Lignes d'Azur, Uber is banned from providing service, and your international voice and data plan is not good there without additional fees. It's like a whole 'nother country!

## **Pedestrian**

On foot is by far the best way to get around and experience the fine grain of the Côte d'Azur. Way finding is well established throughout Nice with signage, defined routes, intersection signaling, and pedestrian priority in public spaces. Typical residential streets are a joy to traverse. The right-of-way is defined on both sides by the consistent building heights of approximately 60 feet. Streets are typically narrow with parkways of perhaps six feet given fully over to sidewalks, parking usually on one side, and two lanes for traffic or with one dedicated for bus. Street trees are reserved mainly for the wider rights-of-way of more important streets. This urban environment avoids austerity through the richness of the façades fronting the streets.

Promenades, plazas, pedestrian streets, widened parkways, and limited vehicle access create a rich pedestrian-favored urban environment throughout the city center. From the Place Massena to the Promenade des Anglais along the waterfront to the typical residential streets, to the pedestrian-only streets of Old Town, elegant architecture define the public realm and invite exploration.

The best pedestrian adventure is to get up close and personal with the Mediterranean. Pathways wind their way around the rugged peninsulas, crowned with villas and standing long and strong against the sea, of Saint Jean-Cap-Ferrat and Cap Martin. These pathways are characterized by their intimate relationship with the sea. They may be steep in their incline or steps, rugged in their surface, and precipitous where they are notched into cliffs with no railings, but they hands-down provide the best way to truly experience the character of the Côte d'Azur with its views, history, textures, and smells. I hope to get back there to experience them again one day.



The pathway circumscribing Saint-Jean-Cap-Ferrat lies at the rugged interface of the Mediterranean and some of the world's most expensive real estate.

The capped Paillon River physically divides yet civically unites Old Town Nice (below) with New Town Nice (above).



Clever name and cool train.



Lignes d'Azur's tram grazing the linear greenway of the Promenade du Paillon River (left), discreet intrusion through the Place Massena (center), and trams yet to come with the construction of the extension to Nice Harbor (right).



Dedicated bus lanes within the city center provide great benefit toward meeting headway times.



Pedestrian dominance in the Place Massena (top left), sidewalk café in Old Town (top right), and the Promenade du Anglais fronting the Mediterranean (bottom).

