

Charmed by Cannes

Imogen Rose

Several times a year, the famous French seaside town of Cannes provides a forum for the media world and its various festivals and markets. The Cannes Film Festival is the most famous. Finding myself at one such event I soon learn that beyond the frenetic and glamorous corporate world of film and television is an attractive, culturally rich and diverse city, steeped in tradition and history.



Imogen Rose is a writer and producer based in Brisbane. She recently travelled to Cannes regarding her multi-platform, children's animated adventure series where she attended MIP Junior (the international market for youth programs) and MIPCOM (the world's audiovisual content market).

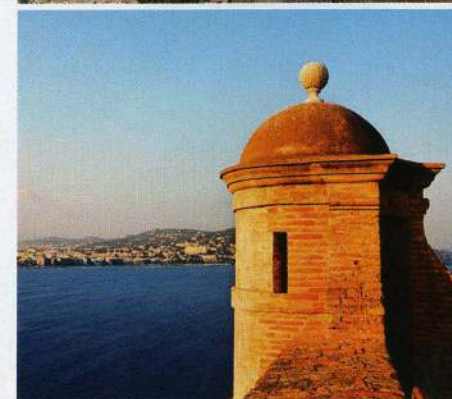
I'm a guest at the world-renowned and atmospheric Hotel Martinez, a spectacular mixture of Riviera glamour and a quintessentially English seaside resort. It is a wonderfully nostalgic and classically beautiful building with sweeping views of the Mediterranean Sea. The hotel was originally built as the villa 'La Coquette' by English aristocrats in the late 19th century and it has a romantic ambience that is palpable. I feel certain that at some point I will surely encounter Miss Marple partaking in afternoon tea as she makes subtle inquiries about 'guests of interest' in the restaurant – or perhaps I'll find Hercule Poirot mentally surmising a case on the esplanade as he gazes steadily upon the ocean.

Cannes is a charming town. The city buses provide an efficient means to get around. The drivers are also remarkably relaxed. One morning, our path is blocked by a male cyclist who meanders obstructively, yet without concern, along the narrow in-bound lane. In doing so, he is preventing the bus passing, either him or a speed in excess of 12 km/h. Yet our bus driver is perfectly patient. We simply continue to follow the cyclist while I seem to be the only passenger desperate to burst into a fit of immature laughter. Eventually the man turns off the road and we are able to regain speed.

The famous Promenade de la Croisette is listed within the French cultural heritage general inventory and the street is lined with exclusive hotels, designer shops and trendy eating venues.

I am particularly fond of 72 La Croisette, where the food and service are both exceptional. The fish is fresh and delicious, cooked perfectly in a distinctive Mediterranean-style smoky way and served on a bed of marinated vegetables and risotto. The meals are also more realistically priced for most travellers.

The Promenade is also a children's delight with carousels, novelty rides and old-fashioned games such as sailing toy boats. It is also a popular place to exercise or relax. It is invigorating to watch the sun rise over the expanse of the sea, dotted with ships and yacht and to witness a horizon equal to, yet vastly different,



Opposite page: Promenade La Croisette
This page, clockwise from top left: street sign; church at Mont Chevalier; cobbled lane; Sainte Marguerite

from most Australian horizons. Here the colours are softer, more gentle, much like an exquisite watercolour painting. In the evening, the dusk creates a similar effect.

One of the easiest ways to explore Cannes is to board a Petit Train de Cannes. To step aboard this train is to be treated to a journey in time. It begins in the La Croisette and climbs Mont Chevalier by following a series of winding, incredibly steep, narrow cobbled lanes into the Suquet District. It is a reminder of the beautiful and venerable age of France. This is the historic heart of Cannes, with walls dating back to the 10th century.

On Mont Chevalier is the magnificent Catholic Church, Notre Dame de l'Esperance which was completed in 1648 and still stands in solemn command of breathtaking views.

The arched side entrance to the churchyard conjures an atmosphere somewhere between Wordsworth's Tintern Abbey and Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca*. I sense in the present the timelessness of the past.

Yesterday and today merge seamlessly in Cannes. With over seven kilometres of coastline, water sports are popular. I watch the swimmers in the cool, calm water (longing for the crisp, uncontrollable waves of Australia) and decide in favour of the

15 minute ferry ride to the Lérins Islands. This group of four islands includes the island of Sainte Marguerite where the 'Man in the Iron Mask' was once incarcerated.

For lovers of gardens and golf, there are remarkable gardens and courses in the area, including the prized Cannes-Mandelieu Old Course, founded in 1891 by Grand-Duke Michael of Russia.

The northern summer and autumn months are a wonderful time to visit – Cannes becomes a city in floral bloom. Lavender, so intrinsically connected with Provençal culture, is at its best in July and August. Interestingly, Australia has also played a role in the horticultural beauty of Cannes – mimosas sent there in the late 19th century have proliferated into more than 1200 varieties.

As I return my umbrella (used for the sun rather than rain) – to the hotel concierge, he asks me if my week has been successful. It has been memorable. I shall miss my morning walk upon the promenade and the painted pastel sunsets, the spectacle of the film world, the hospitable staff at 72 La Croisette, the peace in the churchyard atop Mont Chevalier and the sense that here in Cannes, yesterday, today and tomorrow are somehow one.