

The French Riviera hotspot of Nice is a vacation paradise

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The Suburban

NICE, FRANCE: Between our visits to Paris and London, my family and I came to the conclusion that we wanted to find a place that provided us with the opportunity to sit at a lovely beach by day and enjoy a lively and fun atmosphere in the evening. Nice (<http://en.nicetourisme.com>), located on the French Riviera, was the logical choice.

The rich blue-green sea, diverse shopping, splendid dining and art deco façades represent the true beauty of this vacation paradise. But there are several spots that a tourist simply must see, such as the Cours Saleya Flower Market, the Matisse Museum, ancient Roman ruins, the Russian Cathedral and more. Nice is second only to Paris in the number of museums and galleries.

Few spots epitomize Nice - or, in fact, the joie de vivre of the French Riviera in general -- than the inviting Promenade des Anglais. It is always a beehive of activity. There are tourists relaxing in the royal blue chairs lining the shore, locals roller blading, biking or jogging and vendors selling crepes and drinks.

Nice's famous Flower Market is one of the best attractions in the whole city. The edges are lined with cafés and souvenir shops, and the stands themselves are packed with amazing produce and myriad flowers. It operates six days a week, replaced on Mondays by a flea and antiques market.

The lovely and innovative art of Henri Matisse was inspired by the fresh colors and lines of Nice. Just take a look at any of his art peering out of balcony windows, and you will surely see the Riviera shoreline. This vast museum shows Matisse's

works from his more traditional early days to the end of his career. There are also some of his personal effects here. The museum gift shop features prints of the artist's works.

Old or Vieux Nice is downright dripping with atmosphere. Its narrow streets are a one-stop shop for take-home finds, such as Provençal wares, household items, wine, gourmet gifts, hip clothing and more. There are numerous restaurants in the area, as well as several fun bars and nightclubs. Be sure to stop off for a delicious ice cream in this neighborhood. We went there twice and really soaked up the atmosphere.

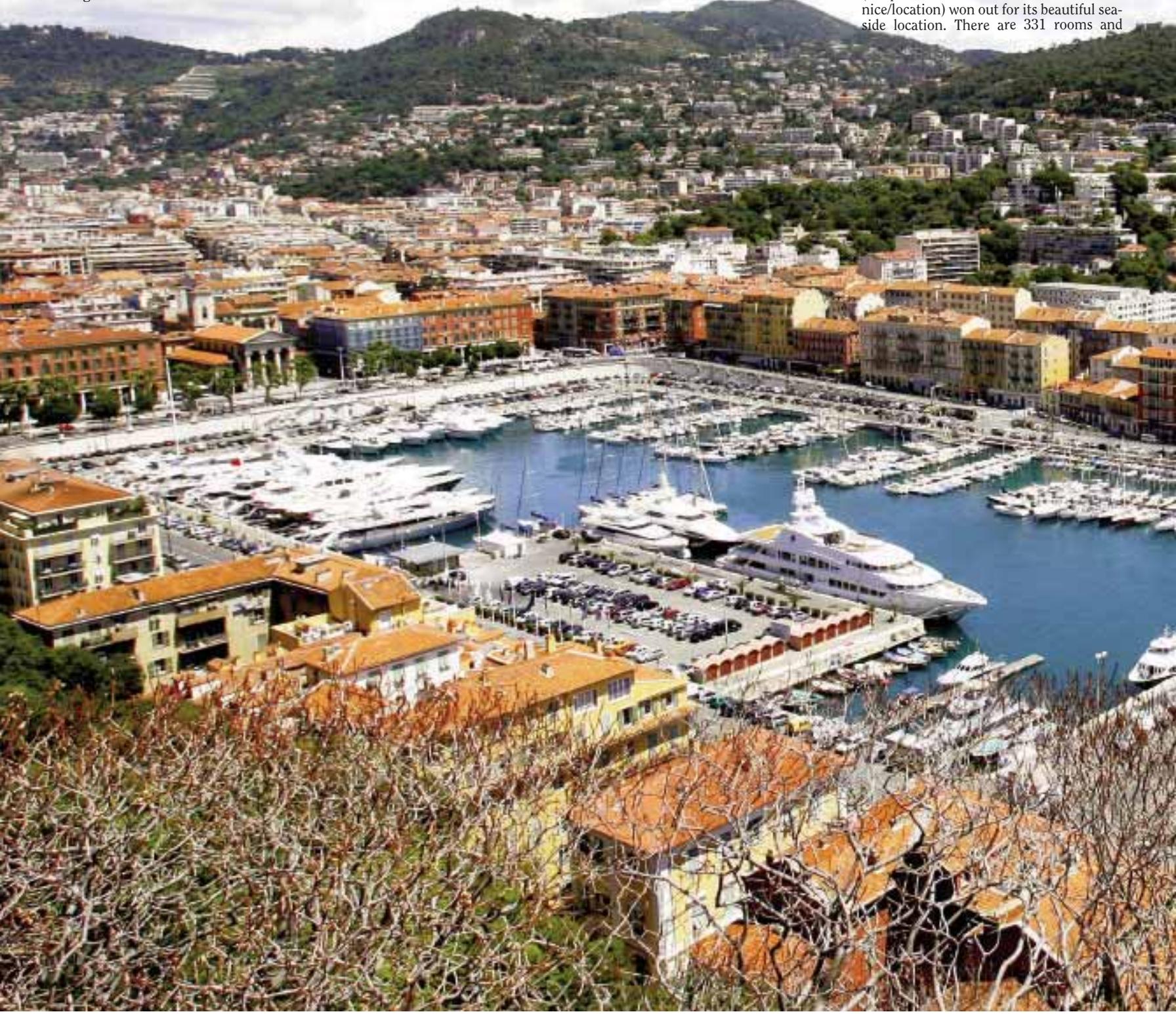
Check out the chateau, for a spectacular panoramic view of the city and sea. You won't actually see much of a castle (only a few sections of it remain). You can take the elevator up for a nominal price or hike up

the stairs for free to the park atop the hill. Be sure to bring your camera.

The Nice pedestrian zone, or "zone piétonne," is a hub of activity. This is the place if you need to load up on souvenirs. Street entertainers frequent this area. There are gourmet and clothing shops, newsstands, bookstores and more. Grab a café au lait and watch the world go by, nibble on a crepe, or visit in the evening for a robust meal with an Italian accent. This is just a lively spot!

The Nice Port area is one frequently overlooked by tourists, but it shouldn't be. Just around the corner from Old Nice and the Quai des Etats Unis, this is a great spot to watch the Corsica ferries lift off. There are also some of the city's hippest nightclubs here.

We spent considerable time researching where to stay and the Radisson Blu (<http://www.radissonblu.com/hotel-nice/location>) won out for its beautiful seaside location. There are 331 rooms and



suites and amenities such as free high-speed, wireless internet access and complimentary entrance to the on-site health and fitness club. You can dine at the Bleu Citron or La Terrasse, both well known for delicious international and regional cuisine, or relax on the rooftop terrace with a refreshing cocktail. This Nice hotel, located at 223 Promenade des Anglais, also offers premier services, such as a rooftop pool, sauna and sophisticated meeting facilities. It is only four kilometres from the airport and five kilometres from the train station. We truly appreciated the free seasonal double decker bus shuttle service to Old Town, which operates in July and August.

We stayed in a picturesque sea view room and let me tell you there is no better sight than opening your blinds each morning, stepping out on a balcony and looking out at the beautiful water and beach front.

Our rate included a generous breakfast buffet at the "Bleu Citron" Restaurant. In order to store some perishables we asked the hotel to empty the mini bar for us, which they did at no charge. The hotel has its own exclusive private beach, open from April to October. For a fee we secured sun lounges for the days we were there. I appreciated the personalized service. By my second day all of the staff remembered my name. You are really pampered here. Not only do they set you up with towels, chairs and umbrellas, but you can order food

and drinks from a menu. This is a rocky beach (no sand), so bring a pair of beach shoes. The water is warm and inviting.

For business and vacationing guests, additional services like a 24-hour concierge, bike rental and business centre make this a great choice for accommodation. The knowledgeable, multilingual staff is always willing to lend a helping hand or give a piece of advice about the area for guests. I was very impressed with the concierge staff. I had started to call and email them often in the months leading up to the trip and they always responded very quickly. Once checked in, they provided a wealth of information.

Where to dine in Nice? There are a lot of choices and we spent a significant amount of time researching the best options. Our search first stopped at Le Grand Balcon (www.legrandbalcon.net) located at 10 rue St. François de Paule near the opera house. The food is all fresh and home-made. Our meal was absolutely spectacular and I would recommend you place the first on your list of dining choices. It is located on the main drag in Vieux Nice. When we arrived for dinner there were a few tables set up on the outdoor terrace. As we dined, we noticed the staff starting to add more. Within minutes the capacity had more than doubled and in no time at all every spot was filled.

The curtains of the "Grand Balcon" were opened in 2003. Charismatic owner Karine Guffanti

and her amazing staff welcomed us warmly, all speaking perfect English. Karine visits with every customer and even takes down orders.

Ideally located between the Place Massena and Cours Saleya, a few steps from the Promenade des Anglais, Le Grand Balcon's indoors features a library of ancient books inside. Chef Jean-Luc Rossi cooks up gourmet dishes unforgettable moments. At only 13 years of age, Chef Rossi joined the Hotel School Paul Augier in Nice. For three years, he shared his time between the College and the majestic Palace "The Regina" in Cimiez. He has been with Le Grand Balcon since 2010.

The menu is neatly set up like a stage presentation. Act I features appetizers and our server recommended the selection platter: the chef's combination of four starters. This included: home-made foie gras; marinated Norway salmon with lime, fennel and dill; raw artichoke salad and shaved parmesan cheese and warm truffles sandwiches. We also shared a fabulous king prawn risotto. For our main course, or Act II, we chose three dishes to share: a grilled beef fillet with super home-made mashed potatoes; scallops in "tuber aestivum" truffles, with added black truffles puree; and sea bass fricassee with sautéed purple artichoke. Act III was dessert. We shared a chocolate delight with home-made caramel and passion fruits and a black truffle and salted butter caramel éclair. Once again, beautifully prepared. This was definitely the best restaurant we experienced in France, topping anything we tried in Paris.

We were excited to learn that there was a Hard Rock Café (<http://www.hardrock.com/cafes/nice>) in Nice. In fact it only opened up last November. The atmosphere was great from the moment we walked in. Our waiter, Igor from Budapest, was full of personality. He actually sat down at our table, chatted about his background and then took our order.

Located at 5 Promenades des Anglais, the multi-level Hard Rock Cafe Nice is nestled near Vieux Nice, along the Mediterranean Sea on the Promenade des Anglais, and is a must-see for both visitors and locals. It has early 6,000 square-feet of space, including seating for 200 guests with 30 seats on a prominent outdoor dining patio. Additional features of the Nice location include a late night bar and Rock Shop filled with iconic Hard Rock merchandise. Additionally, the Cafe functions as a venue for unique private celebrations and memorable event functions to accommodate Nice's growing convention market. For the physically handicapped there are elevators which reach both the rock shop and the second level.

With great rock videos playing on the big screen, we felt very much home looking at the menu. We were in the mood for some really good hamburgers and there was no disappointment when Igor delivered them to our table. There is also a Hard Rock in Paris in the Montmartre District, so make this one of your stops.

In Nice the Hard Rock Cafe pays homage to the city's ethnically diverse culture and fascinating waterfront, accented by upscale design features and innovative technology featured throughout the cafe's indoor and outdoor dining areas. The new location is complete with the Rock Wall Solo, an interactive touch wall with technology that enables fans to explore the world's greatest rock 'n' roll memorabilia collection and virtually tour the company's venues around the world. In addition, memorabilia from Hard Rock's iconic collection adorns the walls of Hard Rock Cafe Nice, including a vest worn by Justin Timberlake, the red wire headpiece Rihanna wore in her "What's My Name?" music video, a drum kit Guns N' Roses drummer Matt Sorum played on the "Use Your Illusions" tour, James Brown's suit worn on tour in the late '70s, a left-handed 2006 Epiphone Tony Iommi Signature SG guitar played by Black Sabbath guitarist, and much

It is interesting that we had to go to Nice to discover a host of new offerings and updated fan favorites now on the Hard Rock menus in the US and Europe. More than 27 types of buns were sampled before the final brioche bun was selected. Burgers were evaluated by a number of different factors, including various blend combinations of premium ground beef and brisket, as well as fat to lean ratios, thickness and shape.

During the menu revamp, Hard Rock made freshness and quality a top priority. The entire entrée salad selection of the menu was reinvented, with five varieties of lettuce combinations brought in during the testing phase. Seasonal options for vegetable of the day and various burger toppings were added as well.

