

Antibes

For many, a classic South of France holiday is associated with Nice and Cannes, where stunning coastlines, glitz and glamour have long drawn vacationers. However, an even more exclusive gem on the French Riviera is Antibes, the second largest city in the region, whose centuries-old history, unique arty vibe and cultural ethos combine effortlessly with an understated luxury.

Begin your tryst with Antibes in Port Vauban, Europe's largest leisure harbour, which sees hundreds of super-luxury yachts. On a sunny day, people are sprawled on towels or taking a dip in the deep blue waters of the Mediterranean Sea at one of the most popular beaches close by — Plage de la Gravette. This is just one of the 30 odd beaches hugging its long coastline that winds along nearly 23km.

When the beach begins to pall, head to the old town whose fascinating historic landmarks give it a dimension beyond that of a playground for the rich and famous. Ramparts that once ringed the city to protect it from invaders still exist and an ancient fort proudly overlooks the harbour.

Known as 'Antipolis' in Greek, Antibes was part of the Greek empire, then it came under Roman rule and only became a part of France in the 15th century. An iconic landmark is the 16th century Fort Carre, which literally means 'square castle'. Built by King Henry II of France, unlike any other fort, it was shaped like a four-pointed star to prevent attacks from all sides because Antibes was the main entry point to the country. The fort may seem familiar because the James Bond movie 'Never Say Never Again' was filmed here.

In cities that are rooted in history, art is seldom far behind. That is so true for Antibes. Overlooking Port Vauban stands a gigantic white sculpture of a man with his arms wrapped around his knees, looking out to the sea called 'The Nomad'. Go closer and you'll find that it is made of a lace-like network of stainless-steel letters and is hollow, so you can walk inside the sculpture. It was part of a temporary exhibition, but town authorities ordered another one to be made for Antibes.

In fact, the city's love affair with art goes back a long way. The cobbled alleys in the old town lead to one of the most famous museums, Musée Picasso. The legendary Spanish artist Pablo Picasso fell in love with this town and worked here daily in the autumn of 1946, where the former Grimaldi Castle served as his studio. In fact, he even made a painting directly on one of the walls. He gave the museum, which is now housed in the same 16th century castle, 44 drawings and 23 paintings. Today, it has a much bigger collection.

Before your tryst with the museum, spend time at the bustling Provençal market, where locals sell cheese, olives, cured meats, herbs, spices, olive oil, flowers, fruits and vegetables. It is delightful to roam around and look at or sample the fresh, local produce.



Hidden gems of the FRENCH RIVIERERA

In Antibes, Vence and surrounding villages like Biot, experience the French Riviera's cultural sophistication embodied in a sun-soaked landscape that has long inspired artists. **Pallavi Pasricha** takes you through the landmarks of old, historic towns and villages where time appears to have stood still.

Folon Chapel in Saint Paul de Vence

Biot

Not too far away from Antibes lies the gorgeous medieval village of Biot, perched on a hilltop and home to just 1,000 people. Its narrow, cobbled stone alleys are lined with patisseries, chocolateries, cafes and souvenir shops that lead to the main village square. Biot's character and beauty lies in its sheer historicity — in the oldest street here, the homes are tightly packed next to each other, harking back to an earlier era.

The main village square is the heart of all the action with people roaming around or relaxing over a meal outdoors. Apart from its quaint charm, Biot is known as the modern glass capital of France and one can

watch glassblowers at work at a couple of factories. The village is home to just a single hotel. For day visitors, it is a good idea to join a guided tour. Try to go on days when there is a Provençal market (twice a week), while art lovers might like to stop by on days when there is an art market.

Vence

If history is enticing, then head to Vence, a former Roman settlement that also boasts of an old town with remains of ancient ramparts, a chapel, quaint boutiques and art galleries. A one-hour walk through the historic town takes one past all its landmarks. Interestingly, the famous



Left: Musée Picasso

Above: The streets of Saint Paul De Vence, Thiebaut Thuria Agency

Below: Antibes



Biot by Bernard Girardin

Above & right: The streets of Saint Paul De Vence, Thiebaut Thuria Agency



French artist Henri Matisse left Nice in 1943 and made Vence his home. The Matisse Chapel or Chapel of the Rosary is a gorgeous church where he designed and painted vibrant stained glass windows, murals and sculptures.

In the vicinity lies another quaint village, Saint Paul de Vence, that also sits atop a hilltop. It almost seems like an open art gallery. On bright, sunny days it is common to see artists, both young and old, step out of their studios to paint on the street. I watched in awe as one of them gave life to a white canvas with vivid colours. This gorgeous village has colourful flowerbeds in every home and at street corners, so it's a treat to just stroll around and soak in the colours.

I also rambled along the 16th century rampart walls to arrive at a lovely vantage point where the verdant Malvan Valley was sprawled before me. I could even spot the towering Alps at a distance.

Saint Paul de Vence's popularity with tourists makes it buzz with cafes, restaurants, shops, art studios and chapels. The Folon chapel stands out thanks to a gorgeous art piece made with more than one million mosaic pieces that depicts the village. Another lovely spot is a 17th century redesigned fountain that lies in the maze of cobbled lanes.

All in all, this was a relaxing, quieter slice of the French Riviera that goes beyond nightclubs, upscale shopping and celebrity glamour. *L*