

## The Cote D'Azur Guide for Motorhomes

The Cote D'Azur has been described as one of the most beautiful stretches of Mediterranean coast. Mention St Tropez, Nice or Monaco and it sums up images of glitz glamour and emerald seas. It is also renowned as being one of the most motorhome unfriendly regions of France, so why go there?

Well having been to just about every department in France over the years we couldn't really avoid it any longer. We had done bits of the French med coast in the past but the only bit of the Cote D'Azur we have done in the past is the area around St Tropez and on each occasion after a day or two we have hurriedly headed back inland in search of peace and quiet. Busy coastal resorts are just not our thing really but in order to really form an opinion you have to "do it" really. So we did and after a shaky start we are really glad that we saw it all properly and will certainly return.

### Who is the guide for?

The first thing I will say about this guide is that it's going to be primarily aimed at motorhomers with secondary transport. We carry a scooter on the back so fellow motorhomers who do the same, or tow a car will find it the most useful. If you're a fit cyclist you may also find it useful and of course it may well be useful for our Tugger (Caravan) friends also.

We try to avoid campsites if at all possible and those of you that have read our guides or blogs before will know that we tend to prefer to be away from the most crowded areas and DO NOT like to pay much for parking the van. With this in mind we knew going to the most popular and expensive destination in the Mediterranean would be a challenge but as it turns out very doable.

Our 2015 tour was all about the bike really. In the four and a half months we were away between July and the end of November we covered over 3500 miles on the little Honda Vision we purchased that year to replace the frankly worn out Peugeot Speedfight. In fact for a while and until the end of the trip the bike had done more miles than the van. What we discovered along the coast was some of the best roads and rides any biker could hope to do but also sadly some of the most hectic and frankly dangerous as you will discover. The bike however in my opinion is by a country mile the best and most rewarding way to see this section of Mediterranean coastline. Typically our rides would be anything from a few miles up to a maximum of a hundred miles in a day.

### Where and when did we go?

We spent two months in late summer from the beginning of September to the end of October travelling from Monaco all the way down to The Costa Brava in Northern Spain. This guide will concentrate on the six weeks we spent between Monaco at Marseille.

There is no official boundary, but it is usually considered to extend from the Italian border (Italian Riviera) in the east to Saint-Tropez, Hyères, Toulon, or Cassis in the west. Cassis is just a few miles east of Marseille.

There are three departments starting in the east with the **Alpes Maritimes** where around Monaco the Alps literally drop down right into the sea, through the **Var department** and ending on the edge of the **Bouches du Rhône** department just east of Marseille. All are within the large region of Provence.

## **When to go?**

I think this was the mistake we made on the short visits to the Cote D'Azur in the past. We always seemed to turf up in July or August. Let's get this straight from the start. This is not the time to go. It's way too busy and if you're going to use campsites (And you will have to at some point) it will cost you an arm and a leg.

We started off in Early September but even then the first two weeks were very very busy. It seems though that the stretch of coast is busiest the further east you go towards Nice and Monaco. It's almost like the Alps concentrate and crush everything on the coast into a smaller and smaller area as they creep down to the coast towards the French / Italian border and everyone wants to be there!

We pretty much headed east to west but went backwards and forwards several times to favourite spots. We saw it all! Every bit of coastline from Monaco to Cassis and a fair bit inland also. To do the same I would say you would need six weeks although you could certainly see the best bits in two to three weeks.

## **Where did we stay?**

A mixture of Aires and ACSI Campsites. There are not that many and we spent a lot of time researching and finding the best ones. If you want to be right by the sea then you can expect Aires to be crammed, grim and expensive. Same applies to campsites but if you're prepared to stay a little way inland then there are some gems. Personally we would always opt for space, peace and quiet and low cost rather than location and on the plus side the places inland where we ended up staying also provided superb access to the fantastic scenery and mountains in the interior.

## **Monaco to Frejus**

The stretch from Monaco to Frejus if you go along the coast is just 60 miles but there is a lot to see and cram in and that 60 miles even on a bike will literally take you all day if you hug the coast. So we used three stopovers in order to fit everything in. Our first was an ACSI campsite just outside Frejus and the second further up the coast in order to see the Monaco and Nice area was at another ACSI Campsite inland a few miles at La Colle Sur Loup. Our third destination turned out to be our favourite and was a fantastic private Aire inland about 10 miles from the coast at Bagnols En Foret. It was so good we went back for a second visit.



**Location 1**

**Monaco to Antibes**



**Where to stay?**

**Le Vallon Rouge (ACSI Campsite) La Colle Sur Loup. Price in 2015 €14.**

**GPS: 43.68458, 7.07325**

Where to stay indeed. This stretch is by far the most difficult if it's Aires or wild camping you are after. There are not even that many campsites as you get beyond Nice. As it was September we

were just in time for the ACSI season and we looked at two sites at La Colle Sur Loup. The one we opted for was called Le Vallon Rouge. We stayed three nights here and it was enough to be honest. We are not into campsites that much and it was ok. It's in a shaded valley and even in September we found it a bit dark and depressing and cold early morning and evening but you are really not spoilt for choice in this area and practicality, location and cost wise it served its purpose for us. It's about six miles from the coast and the trip from the site all the way along the coast to Monaco is just twenty five miles or so but it was the most frantic and busiest scooter ride we have ever had. However it was also one of the most rewarding.



Our pitch on the site at Le Vallon Rouge. One of the least shady locations but not very big. Riverside pitches were available at an extra cost which frankly was not worth it.

Pool area was ok and pretty quiet and the "no shorts" rule I am happy to say seem to not be enforced.

The site was very quiet in early to mid September when we were there. Secondary transport is a must here really.

It's a relatively easy ride down too Nice although two things struck me straight away in this area. First you really need some kind of sat nav on the bike and secondly you seriously need your wits about you. As said it was early September and still very busy but the one thing that really spoilt some of our rides was (and it saddens me to say this) the fellow bikers. Humongous scooters seem to be the order of the day here driven by what can only be described as no brain bikers with a death wish. You need to constantly watch ahead and behind as they show no mercy.

Nice itself for us was a little disappointing but it is the biggest city in the region with nearly half a million inhabitants and Nice Airport is the third busiest in France so you start to get the picture. The views from the hill top monument and park though at the eastern end of town are spectacular and it's well worth the walk (or ride in our case) up.

Moving further east out of Nice is where it gets interesting. The small seaside resort of Villefrance Sur Mer just outside Nice is stunning. You can then ride the lower Seaside Corniche road all the way into Monaco. This is where it gets rewarding. There are three Corniche roads between Nice and Monaco. A lower coastal one, a mid level one and a much higher one. We came along the lower one and back along a mixture of the middle and higher roads.

View of Nice Harbour from the park



Villefrance Sur Mer just along from Nice



I expected Monaco to be rubbish and for me it was. Nothing in Monaco can be described as pretty apart from the road in and the views from the higher road out. I had hoped to do a couple of laps of the Grand Prix circuit but the traffic even on a scooter just proved impossible. A lot of the roads are underground but I did take delight in flying through the famous harbour side tunnel as fast as I could although the Honda Vision 110 just doesn't sound like an F1 car even in a tunnel!

For us and I expect for many it was just a place to tick off the list. However as you climb up out of the city and up onto the upper Corniche which takes you over 1500ft above sea level all that stop start and endless filtering through traffic becomes worth it. The views are breath taking and for a while as your ride along the sweeping cliff top bends it's a 007 moment and you can pretend to be Bond for a while. Passing through La Turbie where poor old Princess Grace met her end along the tops and to the beautiful cliff top village of Eze which is well worth a stop the upper Corniche eventually drops you back down into Nice. We sadly hit Nice at rush hour and in total it took us over two hours to navigate along the high Corniche, through the city, past the airport and back up to the campsite. A distance of about 25 miles.



Mrs D playing the Bond Girl in Monte Carlo.



The best view of the concrete jungle that is Monaco is the one on the road out up into the mountains above

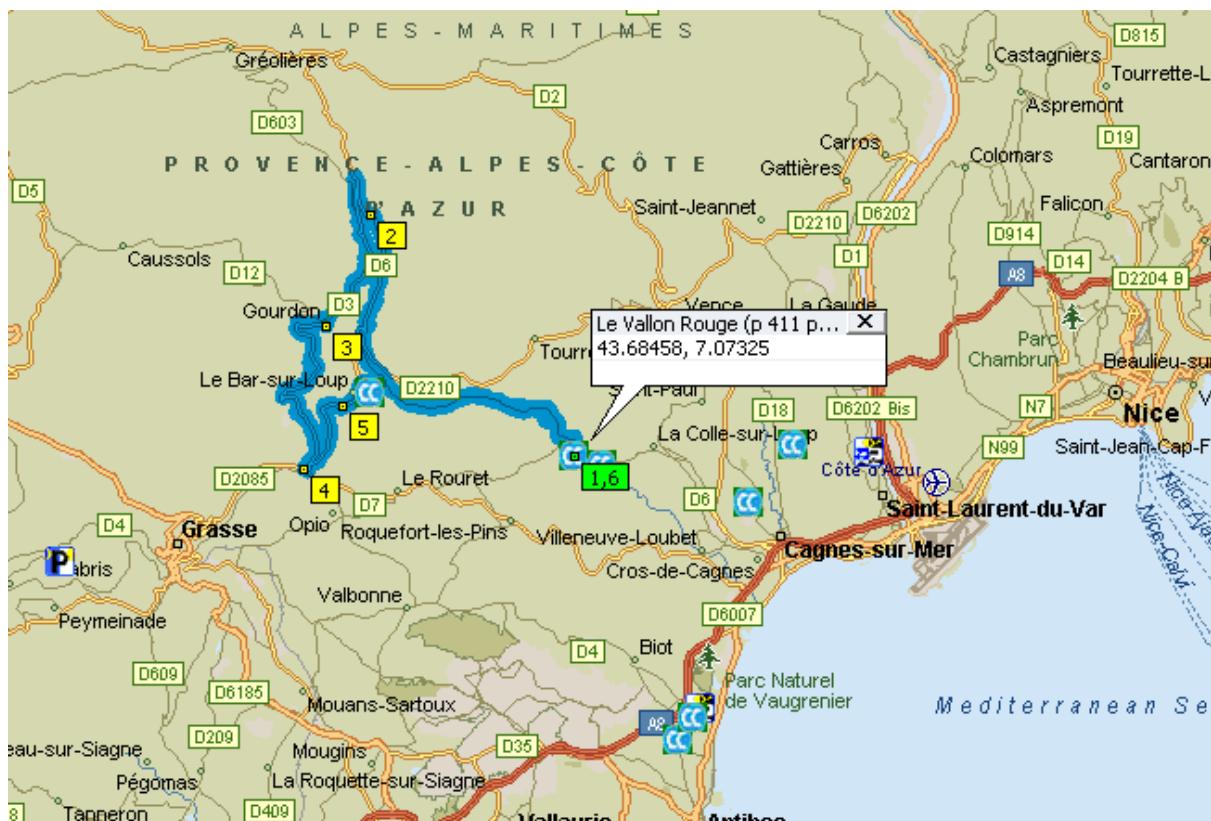


And some cracking views along the high Corniche on the way back



### Mountain Trip Gourdon and Le Bar Sur Loup

Distance 27 miles, max altitude 2500ft



This was a stunning ride out on the bike. The hill top village of Gourdon is well worth a visit. It was also used in the early scenes of the film Les Miserables. As you will see from the route above we did a circular. Roads were good and doable in a European size motorhome, car and of course a bike. Great views down to the coast and the mountains and the village of Le Bar Sur Loup is also worth a visit on the way back.

Also near to the site the villages of Vence and Saint Paul are really worth a look. There are many medieval type villages to stroll around in the area and unlike the coast whilst popular they are nowhere near as busy.



The hill top village of Gourdon

Other villages of interest within easy reach are St Paul and Vence which are well worth exploring.

#### **Antibes, Valbonne, Grasse, Biot and Juan les Pins**

Antibes was a nice surprise. The old town which juts out into the sea next to the large harbour is lovely. Lots going on and plenty of things to see. Some nice eating places and shops but without being tacky.

Biot is also worth a look but sadly shortly after we left it was the victim of a huge storm which left 18 people dead throughout the region and Biot badly affected.

If you are doing that inland route then Valbonne is worth a look also. Grasse is the capital of French Perfume. There are many guides telling you to go there but unless you are really interested in perfume then it really isn't worth the effort. There are many perfume factories and perfume houses open to the public and free tours of some of them are on offer. Up in the hills there are also perfume factories and driving through the mountains you can often be overcome by the smell of the stuff!



Water front at Antibes old town.

Juan Les Pins is just around the corner from Antibes and had / has a reputation of being one of the playgrounds of the rich and famous. It's worth a look but nothing special and not many places to park a motorhome

## Location 2

### Cannes to St Maxime





### Where to stay (Prices 2015)

**La Vaudois ACSI Site (Frejus) at coordinates 43.41086, 6.692028, Cost €12 plus tax (free wifi)**

**Bagnols en Foret (Private Aire) at 43.53595, 6.68894, €5 inc water, €9 inc EHU (No toilet emptying)**

I quite liked the site La Vaudois just outside Frejus. It is listed as quiet all day and night in the ACSI book but take this with a pinch of salt anywhere on the Cote D'Azur as the biggest noise is traffic. There are two sections to the site and the best bit is in the section furthest from the road and next to a corn field out of the edges of the trees which like most campsites in France sadly cover most of the rest of the site. It was fairly quiet and peaceful there and the pitches were a good size. In September it was three quarters full with mainly caravans and the odd motorhome.

The least shady and quietest pitch we could find at La Vaudois

Larger pitches than La Vallon Rouge and not a bad site but no shorts in pool!



### Bagnols En Foret (Private Aire)

Our second location was 10 miles further inland at Bagnols En Foret and was so lovely we came back a second time. It's a private Aire on a farm, a bit like a Large CL and there is masses of grass parking on various levels. A word of warning though the ground is very prone to becoming soft quickly if there is heavy rain so do not park down the bottom if it is likely to get wet. The owner is quite conscious of this. Lovely views to the pretty village of Bagnols and plenty of space to spread out and relax. It's like a different world compared to the bustle of the coast ten miles down the road.

We managed on both occasions to make the toilet last 4 days but there is a proper Aire de Service with parking 8 miles north at Fayence which is worth a look anyway as is much of the surrounding area.

Lots of space at the private aire at Bagnols En Foret



### Trip 1

Frejus, St Rapheal, Corniche route to Cannes and return via the Massif de L'Esterel

Distance 60 miles. All roads suitable for motorhomes.



Frejus old town is really nice and would be quite easily reached on a bicycle from the campsite. The road outside is fairly busy but there are cycle lanes in part of it. Avoid rush hour!

The beachside resorts of Frejus and St Raphael kind of just run into each other and it's hard to see where one stops and the other starts. Both are pleasant enough to serve as a holiday destination

and there are plenty of bars and restaurants at both and some nice beaches. As with everywhere along that stretch its busy busy busy!

The Corniche Route to Cannes though (D559) and the route back through the hills of the Massif de L'Esterelle is what it was all about for me. Stunning and a lovely ride. The traffic on these routes in September was fine as well. Most of the problems are in and around the towns of Frejus, St Raphael and Cannes but nothing as bad as Monaco and Nice.

Cannes was a bit of a disappointment for me. You can do the tourist thing and look at all the hand prints of the stars and have your photo taken outside the Palais des Festivals, maybe have a stroll around the very expensive designer shops or stroll along Le Croisette and the Gardens at the end but it didn't float my boat really.

The route back over the Massif de L'Esterelle though is a super ride (or drive). No massive mountains but some very interesting landscapes and views. It's here though that you also get an idea of just how popular the area is. There are villas and houses everywhere. It doesn't spoil it though and again once you leave the bustle of Cannes behind it's easy to forget it's so busy down at the sea front.

Just up the road inland from the campsite is the delightful village of Roquebrune Sur Argens. It really is a gem of a place and well worth a visit.

### **Trip 2 Frejus to St Maxine 14 miles.**

A nice trip along the coast to St Maxine. There are a few small beaches to stop at and swim.



**Trip 3** from Bagnols, circular into the mountains and Lac de Saint Cassien.

Distance 50 miles



You can easily forget you're in the Cote D'Azur as you head inland from Bagnols en Foret to the villages of Fayence, Seillans, Mons and Callian before dropping down to Lac de Saint Cassien. The roads are pretty quiet but there are some interesting towns, villages, countryside and hills to explore.

The roads up and around Mons though and especially the road connecting Mons down to Callian can be narrow in places. A scooter or small car is ideal but care would be needed on some with a motorhome.



The Perched village of Mons, a guide can be obtained from the TI. Mons is up at over 800 metres above sea level so in September it was actually a bit chilly up there on the bike the day we went.



Some of the roads are narrow.



## Lac de Saint Cassien



### Location 3

#### St Tropez to Cabasson

#### Where to stay

**Collobrieres, Free Wild / Aire. 43.237224, 6.314392**

We loved it so much here we visited three times for 12 days in total. The village lies inland about 15 miles from the nearest coast at Le Lavandou and about 22 miles west of St Tropez.

The village itself is perfect and was fairly lively when we were there in late September. A few shops, restaurants and bars and a famous ice cream factory and outlet.

There are two Aires. The co-ordinates above are the large grassy area to the east of the village about quarter of a mile outside but on the other side of the village is a hard standing gravel car park with a service point.

There is more space on the grassy aire than you will ever find on any campsite and we loved it.

The ride through the hills either to St Tropez or down to Le Lavandou area is stunning but again some of the roads need caution with a motorhome as they can be narrow. We arrived the first time from the east and came over the mountain road D39 from Gonfaron. This was by far the worst road and very narrow in places but doable in a 7.5 metre motorhome with care.

## Trip one

Circular route from Collobrières via Bormes les Mimosas, Cabasson, Le Lavandou, along the coast through Cavalaire Sur Mer, Ramatuelle, Saint Tropez and Grimaud. Distance 75 miles.



This route is best done anti clockwise from Collobrières down to Bormes first to take in the views of the Mediterranean as you head through the hills towards the coast.

Bormes Les Mimosas is a lovely place and well worth a stop and Cabasson was a gem of a find. Stunning beach and fort and a charming area. There is actually overnight motorhome parking right at the end of the road amongst the cars but from memory it was quite expensive. However just a hundred yards back up the road which I think you have to go around the one way system to get to was a charming little campsite which wasn't expensive. If you don't want to stay inland then this would be the place to head for if you want a relaxing time by the sea.

## The Aire at Collobrieres



Most of the trips we did out on the bike from Collobrieres were based around the route shown above. There are a few mountain roads heading up and around Collobrieres which are definitely only passible on a scooter.

We visited St Tropez three times and loved it there. It still has a laid back feel to it despite it being on the Cote D'Azur and generally bustling and it's our favourite (Famous) resort along the stretch. Great Kebab shop just off the main square.

Getting around it or out of it at rush hour though is not for the faint hearted but that could be said about many of the resorts along the coast.

Grimaud town is well worth a look around, not to be confused with Port Grimaud on the coast which is described as a little Venice but in reality is a manmade labyrinth of canals built within a marina development and for us it's all a bit fake but an interesting place to visit all the same.





The Campsite at La Tour Fondue



Toulon from high up



The beaches surrounding the spit of land out to the peninsula are a haven for Wind and Kite surfers. It's a spectacle to see but sadly by windsurfing days are over due to my dodgy knees.

Some lovely little swimming areas around the peninsula as well.



## Location 5 Cuges les Pins, La Ciotat and Cassis

**Where to stay. Aire at Cuges les Pins, 43.28148, 5.70588 cost €3 inc services**

Our last destination on the Cote D'Azur was the Aire at Cuges les Pins. We first visited it in 2009 in peak season when it was one of the hottest days of that trip. It's a cracking aire about half a mile up a track from the village which is somewhat unremarkable. It's kind of in the middle of nowhere really but a handy and lovely ride through the hills to a couple of lovely coastal towns and two really stunning rides. One cliff top and one up a mountain.

In 2009 we were visited by cheeky and very bold goats. One actually tried to get in the van. I am pleased to say they are still there but we didn't let them in this time.

There is a rule on the aire that you must park facing outwards on each of the three levels. The police who collect the money (When they can be bothered) enforce this. I think it's because of the very real risk of fire. I think the fees are about three euros.

## La Ciotat and Cassis

Two lovely little towns. Cassis is stunning but the main attraction here is the ride between the two. The coastal road twists and turns and as it rises offers stunning vistas out to sea and along the coast towards Marseille.

## Route 1. Cuges les Pins, Ciotat, cliff top road and Cassis



The Aire at Cuges les Pins



Some cracking roads along the coast



The view down to Cassis



Cassis





**Route 2, Col de L'Espigoulier. Altitude 725 metres, 27 miles**



Our last ride in the area was spotted by Michelle and was an impromptu ride up the Col de l'Espigoulier. It's only 725 metres in altitude but we were amazed at the difference in temperature at the top in late September when it was a lovely 26 degrees at the bottom and what felt like about 15 degrees at the top. It's a cracking little col to ride up though with some great views.



So that concludes our little Cote D'Azur guide. We did continue on beyond Marseille along the coast through the Camargue round to Perpignan area and on into Spain and Catalonia and the Costa Brava but that's another story!

Author Barry Dobson

Please get in touch if you want more information at [contact@hankthetank.co.uk](mailto:contact@hankthetank.co.uk)