

Client: APS Select Yellow News
Source: The Guardian (Travel)
Date: 18 August 2018
Page: 8
Reach: 149420
Size: 879cm2
Value: 12569.7



Saint-Tropez's low-key sister

Bypassed by superyachts and ignored by paparazzi, the little town of Sainte-Maxime across the bay offers a classy Riviera break but without the glitz and high prices, says *Jon Bryant*

There are more bakers and butchers than nightclubs and nail bars in Sainte-Maxime, just north of Saint-Tropez in Provence's Var département. And colourful fishing boats land the day's catch right on the harbour.

Less ritzy than many of its Côte d'Azur neighbours, this small town has an unflashy lifestyle suited less to film stars than to the saint it is named after. Maxime was a daughter of a ninth-century Count of Grasse, who rejected his wealth, turned her back on her family and took herself off to nearby Callian, where she founded a convent. A painting in the stark, local church shows her refusing a coffer of gold.

Opposite the church is the **Tour Carrée**, Sainte-Maxime's only real historic monument, a fortified blockhouse built in 1520 to defend the coast against Saracen pirates. Today, it's a museum of local history (open 3pm-6pm Wed-Sun, adult €3).

Sainte-Maxime remained a tiny port throughout the 18th century: wine, olive oil, vegetables and cork from the Maures forest were loaded on to *tartanes* (small sailing vessels) and shipped along the coast. The trading port has now been replaced by a marina with 800 moorings.

Just behind the marina, the traffic-free

Promenade Aymeric Simon-Lorière, shaded by pines, palms and cacti, leads to a gravel and sand beach. There are boules courts (floodlit for evenings), with balls to hire from an on-site hut. A game costs just €2 (€3 on Wednesday and Saturday).

The seafront has the usual phone-case and beachwear shops, interspersed with bars and brasseries. **Café Maxime** on Avenue Charles de Gaulle is always heaving with holidaymakers, and for good reason - the salads are huge and fresh, and generous sharing boards of charcuterie cost €12. Back towards the marina, on the edge of the of the newly cobbled streets of the old town, **Café de France** has been there since 1852, when Sainte-Maxime was still a fishing village. Old photos on its walls show fishing nets drying outside. Today it has an outdoor terrace, jazz nights and a two-course lunch for €14 - a bargain on the French Riviera.

Le Bistrot de Louis on narrow place Colbert is another favourite: its three-course *menu du bistro* (€26) is worth the money: faultless fish soup, sea bream filet and a *dame blanche* (vanilla ice-cream, whipped cream and chocolate sauce). For less formal eating try **Le Porche**, in a medieval archway off rue d'Alsace, which does burgers of several kinds for around €11.50, with chips and salad.

On summer evenings, the streets around **Place du Marché** come alive with



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the stalls selling jewellery, straw hats and provençal lavender soaps. There's live music and locals hang out around the stone *lavoir* - the old public laundry - eating ice-cream. The indoor morning market merits a browse too - pick up cheese, fruit and rotisserie chicken or indulge in the oyster bar at the back.

For the best beach action, follow the coast road east and north, past giant parasol pines and gated villas, to **Plage de la Nartelle**, 2km of sand with parasols and water sports. Beside the road sit the rusted remains of an amphibious Sherman tank used in the Allied landings on 15 August 1944. Damaged by a German land mine, the tank remained buried under the sand until a storm in 2011, and has since been part-restored. French resistance fighters in Sainte-Maxime were informed of the landings by two coded messages transmitted by the BBC in London: "*Nancy a le torticolis*" (Nancy has a stiff neck) and "*Le chef est affamé*" (The chef is famished).

A little further up the coast is **Plage Les Eléphants**, a thin strip of sand named for Jean and Cécile de Brunhoff's Babar children's books. The couple had a house here in the 1930s and the bay inspired Jean to illustrate Babar's balloon-trip honeymoon with Celeste in *The Travels of Babar* (1937). The seaside villa is now in private hands but there are bungalows to rent on nearby campsite Les Cigalons (from €290 a week, camping-cigalon.net).

Whichever beach you are on, the view across the gulf is of the flesh-coloured facades of Saint-Tropez. Ferries operated by **Les Bateaux Verts** run to the resort every 15 minutes from Sainte-Maxime marina. Visitors imagine they'll spend the day in Saint-Tropez, but three hours is probably enough time to watch the superyachts coming in and out, visit the Annonciade art museum and wander the narrow streets.

Saint-Tropez can be intense in the summer. Its tanned, pampered denizens parade around in a uniform of sparkling white beach tunics, macramé bikinis and pastel shorts, their hair swept back and a raffia basket slung over one slender, tanned arm. Copycats arrive on shiny motorbikes or in open-top sports cars, but they are easy to spot - shabby St-Trop is a

hard look to pull off.

Sainte-Maxime may be Saint-Tropez's less showy little sister but it still has the feel of a classy riviera resort: it has its own casino and, as in other places, men can be fined €38 for going shirtless away from the beach. It's refreshing to find such an unpretentious base on this stretch of coast - but fun to be able to dip into the nearby glitz too.

● *Accommodation was provided by Restanques du Carré Beauchêne (summerfrance.co.uk), which has villas with private pool sleeping seven from £1,088 a week. Easyjet flies to Nice from seven UK airports*

'Café de France opened in 1852 and does lunch for €14 - a bargain on the Riviera'



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Get your côte
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de Louis