

The *gorgeous* Gulf of SAINT-TROPEZ



Janine Marsh explores a secret part of the French Riviera...

“Once upon a time there was a jewel nestling between Provence and the Côte d’Azur...” began an email I got from a friend. Who can resist an introduction like that? Certainly not me! So, I headed to the Golfe de St-Tropez, and found a little piece of French heaven.

The Golfe de Saint-Tropez is bijou, stretching 30km from north to south, and 26km from east to west, consisting of 12 Provençal villages and seaside resorts: Cavalaire-sur-Mer, Cogolin, Grimaud, Gassin, La Croix Valmer, La Garde-Freinet, La Mole, Le Plan de la Tour, Rayol-Canadel-sur-Mer, Ramatuelle, Sainte-Maxime and Saint-Tropez.

Saint-Tropez is of course world-famous thanks to its most well-known resident Brigitte Bardot, but if your only goal is to visit this lovely town, you’ll miss out on so much more. Head for the hills to explore exquisite, pickled-in-the-past perched villages, vineyards, and captivating coastal towns lapped by the Mediterranean Sea where dolphins frolic. Discover a land where the coast and countryside are inextricably linked and where the locals work in harmony with nature to preserve and protect this most beautiful, unspoiled and authentic part of France.

When to go

The best time to visit may surprise you, it’s not during the summer months - though they are lovely, but instead spring and autumn when the weather is lovely, everything is open, the sea is warm enough to swim in and the natural beauty of the area takes precedence. Or even in winter with average sunshine 7 hours per day, and the sight of blooming wildflowers, including lavender and fresas, lifts your soul. Visit the vineyards and enjoy wine tastings, meet the locals who work with and preserve nature, eat like a lord, and enjoy being welcomed as a guest not a visitor.

The Villages

If, like me, your idea of an authentic French village is the sight of ancient trunk-twisted olive trees, plane tree-lined squares, medieval fountains, sun-kissed old stone houses mellowed by the passing centuries, delicate bell towers, and azure blue skies, then the Golfe de Saint-Tropez is your kind of place too...

Saint-Tropez

The former tranquil fishing village can get busy as there is only one main road that winds around the bay, so leave the car behind and take a boat ([Bateaux Verts](#)), from either Sainte-Maxime, Marines de Cogolin, or Port Grimaud. The journey takes around 15-20 minutes, no traffic jams and no parking needed!

Wander Saint-Tropez' pretty streets, ogle the super yachts, visit the town's iconic tower and best of all, discover the local history through its food on a [Gourmet tour with Beyond the wine](#). Follow in the footsteps of your guide Sonia, a specialist in local produce, to discover the delicious surprises she has selected for you. At the market, piles of vegetables and fruit look like still life paintings. The smell of truffled Brie, and of 36-month-old goat cheese made by writer, poet and legendary farmer Loïc de Saleneuve, and of garlic infused olives, chestnut spread and nougat, assails your senses.

You can't visit Saint-Tropez and not eat a [Tarte Tropézienne](#) and the tour includes a stop at the mythical patisserie where the cake was born and where Tartes of every size and flavour are displayed like jewels in a cabinet. Enjoy with a glass of local pale rosé. Resistance is futile.

Want a culture fix? There are several museums including the lovely [Annonciade](#), a former 16th century chapel where artist Paul Signac lived. Arriving in 1892, and mesmerised by the



Saint-Tropez © S. Oliver visitgolfe.com



Loïc de Saleneuve, goat cheese farmer extraordinaire



Sainte-Maxime © S. Oliver visitgolfe.com



© Tarte Tropézienne



B&B Maison du Prince, Grimaud

landscape, he encouraged other artists, including Henri Matisse, to join him here and you can see many of their paintings in the museum. Don't miss a visit to the fun and fascinating [Musée cinéma et gendarmerie](#).

Sainte-Maxime

Once a quiet fishing village, its fortunes changed when the railway line arrived in the 1800s creating what was known as the Route des Pignes, the Route of the Pines, named after the umbrella pine trees that grow in profusion here. Inspired by the success of Nice in attracting hordes of tourists, Ste-Maxime developed its tourism offer with a casino and holiday apartments. The railway line is now gone. Destroyed during WWII, it was considered too expensive to repair and replace but Ste-Maxime remains one of the biggest and most bustling towns in the area with year-round festivals, fetes and fairs. Take a [guided tour to discover the history and architecture of Sainte-Maxime](#) from the Tour Carrée built by monks, to the façade of the Palais des Sirènes to the palatial former home Léon Gaumont, pioneer of the motion picture industry in France.

Ramatuelle

Perched on a hill, the whole village of Ramatuelle, a former Roman outpost, is a listed historic monument. It's a sleepy little village that's full of surprises. In Place du Chateau there is no chateau, but ancient houses lean against each other for support, there are secret passages, cosy cafés and an innovative free tourist app that takes you on a treasure hunt. Like everywhere in this area, people are acutely eco-aware; cooking oil fuels the lawnmowers, and the council is creating a rain harvest system underground to water the plants. "It's about sharing" says Bruno Caietti from the tourist office "for everyone here, share and sustain - it's a win/win".



Grimaud

Winding roads and ancient staircases lead you to the top of a mountain where the ruins of an 11th century, Grimadi-family owned (after whom the town is named) castle seem to spring straight from earth. Ponder 1000 years of history as you listen to wild nightingales sing and gaze out over the landscape and hilltop towns. The cobbled streets are awash with colour from plants and flowers that climb the walls and around the doors and windows of the old buildings while the ancient church bells ring, reminding us that time is passing despite the feeling it has stood still for centuries here.

Visit the local area by 2cv or Mehari with [Deuch'moiselles](#) run by Coglin-based Virginie lafolia. I travelled in a 2CV named Brigitte, there's also Jack (named after Virginie's Jack Russell), and Camille named after her grandma "they're a bit like children to me" she laughs. As we pootled and tooted tree-lined roads, everyone turned to smile - these cars bring out the happy in everyone.

Lunch: La Halle de Grimaud: a small covered market, with fresh cooked street food and sandwiches make this a favourite with the locals, it feels like you're taking a holiday when you eat lunch here!

Dinner: [Le Petit Jacques](#), Grimaud. Recently re-opened under the new ownership of a young couple, you'll find a warm welcome, excellent local, seasonal dishes cooked by Canadian chef Francis and an excellent wine list chosen by his partner Susanne. Everything is homemade, from the bread and sauces to the brioche and vanilla ice cream.

Stay: B&B [La Maison du Prince](#), in the rue du Knights Templier, Grimaud - named for the band of crusading knights who guarded this part of the coast in the 12th century. Match a historic village house with a touch of interior design and you have a truly charming chambre d'hôtes. Owner and host Patrice Favière dreamed of having a small home Grimaud after a career in Paris, but fell hook, line and sinker for this B&B where the young Prince Rainier of Monaco often stayed when



Coglin, Virginie des Deuch'moiselles



Le Petit Jacques



Cavalaire © lezbroz

it was his childhood friend's home. Featuring a superb collection of artworks, kitsch flea market finds and Prince Rainier memorabilia, and boasting the comfiest of beds, Maison du Prince is a unique and fabulous place to stay.

Seaside Ambiance

Thirty-eight beaches, secret coves, bustling ports and shining marinas, with calm and sparkling waters, coastal paths and glorious seaside towns...

Pampelonne

If you go looking for the beach where a nubile BB steamed up the camera lens in the 1956 movie *'And God Created Woman'*, in St-Tropez as many do, you won't find it, but it's

not far away. The Bay of Pampelonne is made up of several small coves and bays which together form Ramatuelle beach. The 4.5km of beaches are a paradise for swimming and sun-bathing. This coastline also stood in for French Polynesia in the early days of film - it's easy to see why with soft silky sand, and greenish-blue blue waves split by soft whitecaps. But there's more to this place.

For the last 30 years there has been a big effort to return the area to its natural state with dune protective measures. 90,000 native plants were dug up and conserved for several years to keep them safe but are now replanted and thriving, helping to stop erosion. The restaurants which once sprawled on the beach have been moved back slightly to enlarge the beach area and protect the precious sand. And small dune areas created to protect

wildlife and the environment now enhance the beaches. It's an astonishing success story, the first conservation programme of its kind, and other countries are now studying the results to learn how to keep more areas safe and preserved for the future.

Lagoon city - Port Grimaud

Built in the 1960s by visionary architect François Spoerry on former marshland, the 'lagoon city' of some 2,500 villas, is mind-bogglingly pretty. Provence meets Venice. I was speechless at the unique architecture with buildings in every shade of pastel. Crossed by numerous canals, the alleys and squares are connected by small bridges and almost every home has a private boat mooring. You can get lost in its maze of narrow streets punctuated by bridges, but a short canal tour by boat [Coche d'eau](#) is the best way to truly appreciate this unique and incredible village on the sea.

Lunch: [L'Orangerie beach restaurant](#) open year-round overlooking the beach, a great holiday atmosphere, delicious menu (linguini vongole is the most popular with the locals says owner Fabien) and perfect for watching the sunset.



André Del Monte



Port Grimaud © S. Oliver visitgolfe.com



Domaine du Rayol S. Oliver visitgolfe.com



Pampelonne beach orangerie



Hotel Terrasses du Bailli © heurebleue.studio

Dinner: [Le Maurin des Maures restaurant](#) Proprietor and chef André Del Monte, affectionately known to his customer as Dédé, is nicknamed the 'King of the Bouillabaise.' It's been his signature dish for some 40 years at the restaurant which overlooks the Bay of Rayol and where the walls are

lined with photos of happy diners including French presidents and Hollywood celebs. "I make bouillabaise like you make at home, traditional. Cooking it is easy, cleaning the fish is hard. It's all about the quality of products. My hands are stained red with saffron when I prepare it... I mix the fish with onions, garlic, tomato, potato and a few more things. I prepare it the day before to give it time for the flavours to infuse and give it a stronger taste. It's a sharing meal, even after so long making it, I still have it at home, I love it" he grinned. "You want to know the story of bouillabaise?" I

nodded, enthralled by his natural story telling. "Well in the old days, the fishermen had too much fish, they couldn't sell the ugly fish..." I'll leave him to tell you the rest when you visit!

Stay: Hotel [Les Terrasses du Bailli 3*](#) in Rayol-Canadel. Rooms have terraces with sun loungers overlooking the Med. The beaches are just minutes away on foot, a honeypot of a hotel in a tranquil location with access to private pool and beach, spa facilities and restaurant.

Natural Beauty

The Gulf of Sainte-Tropez may be small, but the landscape is incredibly diverse. From the beaches to the Massif des Maures, one of the oldest masses on earth, a strikingly vivid chain of primeval rocks in hues of grey, red and violet, covered in chestnut and cork forests. The Corsica-like garrigue, an undergrowth of aromatic herbs, fauna and flora scents the air. There are around 40 wineries where the sun-blessed grapes produce the most elegant roses, whites and reds. This is a place for hiking, cycling, horse riding, visiting the botanical gardens, and enjoying the region's amazing nature activities.



Maison Foncin S. Oliver visitgolfe.com

Villa Foncin and House of Nature, Cavalaire

The brand-new [House of Nature](#) opens mid-June 2024 with exhibitions and a focus on protecting the environment, saving water, and making the most of what you grow. From the centre's garden, take a ten-minute walk through shady forest to the Villa Foncin, the lavishly built mansion of Pierre Foncin (1841-1916). French cartographer and founding member of the Alliance Française. Set atop a cliff in an area of outstanding natural beauty, every window frames a view that looks like a painting, overlooking the Golden Isles, like gardens in the surrounding sea.

Domaine du Rayol

Almost hidden away down a side street, the Mediterranean gardens of the [Domaine du Rayol](#) transport you to another world where pathways squiggle their way through bamboo tunnels, past waterfalls and along small cliffs. You'll encounter palm trees from New Zealand, a dense profusion of trees and plants from around the world from mimosa whose scent wafts lazily in the winter months to a prickly cactus collection and giant Bird-of-Paradise plants whose flowers weigh a whopping 2 kilos. Created by ground-breaking gardener Gilles Clément who's pioneering 'work with, not against nature' ethos has had wide influence, you'll encounter a heady mix of colour and sultry perfumes year-round,



Domaine Up Ultimate Provence, La Garde-Freinet

framed by magnificent views over the lapis-coloured Med. Head-spinningly beautiful, this is a place to simply wander or discover its secrets with a guided tour (French & English language).

Stay: [Domaine Up](#) in La Garde-Freinet, an exceptional hotel in an exquisite location in the heart of a vineyard surrounded by forest. New-wave Provençal accommodation with old school glamour, deeply restful, luxurious rooms with private terraces, a gleaming spa, massages on top, gorgeous gardens and a sports area including a glass-walled badminton court overlooking the vines. The seriously sleek bar offers tastings of the estates own fabulous wines. Leave room in your sightseeing itinerary to float in the pool and soak up the ambiance of this little bit of Provençal paradise.

Lunch: The elegant [Café des Jardiniers](#) at Domaine du Rayol is open to all garden visitors. You can't reserve in advance, and it's super popular, so get there early and enjoy a seasonal menu and a great choice of cocktails and wine.

Dinner: Domaine UP – foodie heaven, superb fine dining, cocktails on the roof terrace watching the sun set, or on the pétanque pitch.

Discover the area and heaps to see and do at: www.visitgolfe.com



GOLFE DE SAINT-TROPEZ TERRITOIRE D'EXCEPTION