

the DUMAS BERGEN travel chronicles



The village of Mougins.



Picturesque cobblestone alleyways.



The village of Ventimiglia.



One of Chef Sébastien Chambru's works of art.

The perched villages of the Côte d'Azur: From Eze to Mougins



More than a hundred villages sprinkled a few kilometres inland from the fabled beaches of France's Mediterranean coast have become known as "the perched villages of the Côte d'Azur."

Some languish across the tops of gentle ridges. Others, known as *les nids d'aigles*—literally, eagle's nests—cling precariously to rugged, craggy, almost scary pinnacles of rock. Convenient four-lane autoroutes or narrow twisting switchbacks can reach a few. And for the purist, there are those best reached with a backpack. Ugh!

All are beautiful, fascinating, ancient relics of a turbulent past. And most boast views to die for.

The region's history of almost constant conquests explains why its earliest inhabitants tended to band together and built hill-top villages, castles and fortresses, always keeping a watch on the surrounding territory as far as the eye could see.

Eze to start

On one of our earliest visits, we began with Eze. Pardon the pun, but the very name inferred it would be less difficult to reach!

Eze perches about 400 metres seemingly straight up from the Mediterranean, just off Autoroute A-8 that swoops across the rugged coastal range between Nice to the west and Monaco to the east. We stashed the car in the parking lot at the base and started the awesome trek up.

This particular crag became a hideout and military observation post as early as the 15th century. In the late 1800s, the isolation—and doubtless the view—drew a special breed of artists and writers.

One of them, Frederick Nietzsche found a hiking route between Eze-bord de mer and our mountain-top village. It became known as the Nietzsche Trail and today a well-weathered plaque marks both ends. For a hardy hiker, the rugged descent to the Mediterranean takes over half an hour. And the huffing and puffing back up? About an hour.

When we saw the heart defibrillation station at the entrance to the walled village, however, we decided to take it slowly. We enjoyed twisting, climbing alleyways that were often scarcely wide enough for two persons to pass. The many shops, art galleries and spectacular vistas were ample compensation for the gradient.

On the way up we passed **Château de la Chèvre d'Or** (www.chevredor.com) a mythical Relais & Châteaux hotel with a romantic terrace for dining and a swimming pool overlooking the Med. Reaching the top, **Château Eza** (www.chateaeza.com) beckoned with its panorama and outdoor dining area hanging over the cliff. Lucky for us, it was lunchtime. A flute of Champagne Deutz was the recommended aperitif, while the menu and hors d'oeuvres were brought to our table. A few delectable tapas made this stop worth the climb.



Much coveted lands

Six hundred years before the birth of Christ, Celto-Ligurian shepherds carved Bronze Age images into stone found between 200 and 2,800 metres above sea level. Over the ages, this land has been disputed by a long list of powers ranging from the Phoenicians and Ligurians, through to the Romans, Barbarians, the Country of Nice and the House of Savoy, as well as the kingdoms of France, Piedmont, the Empire and the Republic of France.

Gourdon

While in the region, it is always appropriate to consider other perched villages to add to a collection. We recommend the picturesque, medieval village of Gourdon with its dominant **Feudal Château**. It perches about 300 metres above the floor of the Loup Valley, some 10 kilometres "as the crow flies" from the Mediterranean.



The winding access road covers almost twice that distance. But the exciting drive is worth it as restaurants with beautiful views abound. After all, the *raison d'être* for these villages was to see as far as possible.



Hotel des Mas du Grand Vallon.

Parent's experienced Resort One pedigree includes creation of Velero Beach resort in the Dominican Republic, the upscale hotel residence Le Crystal de la Montagne in downtown Montreal and Le Saint-Sulpice Hotel in Old Montreal. He swiftly found his way through the intricate legal and judicial requirements (it's France, after all) and viola, spring 2010 arrived along with his newest hotel designed by a well-known Provençal architect!

During our most recent visit, the Cannes film festival was in full swing. The just-opened Les Mas du Grand Vallon was already a budding getaway spot for movie executives, as well as for other international and Canadian guests who welcome a break out on the green.

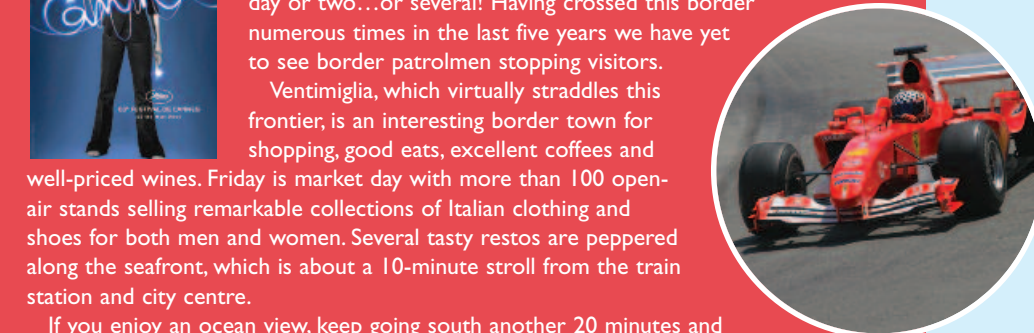
The tasteful apartments surround a well-landscaped garden and swimming pool. Patios are ideal for executive schmoozing and semi-private champagne get-togethers.

France to Italy and back again, in a day!



If you're visiting the Cannes Film Festival in France or the Grand Prix weekend in **Monaco**, consider heading half an hour directly south after the event for a quick and hop over to Italy for a day or two...or several! Having crossed this border numerous times in the last five years we have yet to see border patrolmen stopping visitors.

Ventimiglia, which virtually straddles this frontier, is an interesting border town for shopping, good eats, excellent coffees and well-priced wines. Friday is market day with more than 100 open-air stands selling remarkable collections of Italian clothing and shoes for both men and women. Several tasty restos are peppered along the seafront, which is about a 10-minute stroll from the train station and city centre.



If you enjoy an ocean view, keep going south another 20 minutes and park in the seashore lot at **Bordighera**. One of the most characteristic small Italian villages in the region, its core is surrounded by tightly packed picturesque hotels and shops that spill across the rocky shoreline.

There, down on the beach at the very edge of the Mediterranean, you'll find the aptly named **Acqua di Mare Bordighera**—a quaint little bed and breakfast painted crisp blue and white. It's the perfect spot to savour a traditional Italian lunch. Small wonder that Renoir, Monet and Cézanne camped along these beaches more than a century ago. With culture, cuisine, climate and colourful scenes, it is a place to remember.

After your early morning dip, we urge you to add a trip up to the village of Mougins. Here, medieval cobblestone streets coil round and round like a snail shell, with a historic bell tower at the core.

Inside that tower is a narrow staircase that shrinks to an actual ladder where we ultimately climbed hand over hand. It's worth it, because this opens out onto a narrow balcony with an unobstructed 360-degree view. Medieval village roofs paint the foreground, forested hills roll away in the distance and there, some seven kilometres to the south, is the Mediterranean.

Another must-see in Mougins is the Picasso Photography Museum—with pictures chiefly in dramatic black and white. Here, we can savour the pure power and the glory of more than three decades of Picasso's work, life and loves.



For the foodies

Not too far away, the **Moulin de Mougins** (made famous by Roger Vergé; www.moulin-demougins.com) continues to impress. Dine as we did in the garden of wonders with spectacular works of art. Chef **Sébastien**

Chambru also conducts cooking classes. In mid September there is the **Festival de la Gastronomie et des arts de vivre**. Chefs gather in Mougins to showcase their art and enter the competition Les Étoiles de Mougins (stars of Mougins). Foodies, take note. 🍴