



Fishermen's cottages at Le Vallon des Auffes

# Magical Marseille

**David Young** was enchanted by the laid-back, earthy charms of France's second city

**‘Y**ou'll love Marseille," beamed Gaëlle from behind the reception at the New Hotel. "Or you'll hate it."

Caught off-guard by the instant candour, I stood enthralled. There I was in a plum spot, facing Le Vieux Port, and just off the city's main thoroughfare, Le Canebiere, and my host had wasted no time in rousing me from my travel stupor.

"It's a city of rich and poor," she added, smiling, while sketching Marseille's demographics and cosmopolitanism. "With people from many, many different places."

Before I could come to terms with the intensity and flow of her delivery, Gaëlle reeled me back in: "But I'd say you'll love it."

Intrigued by the oddly honest welcome, I flung my stuff in my room and ventured out into the warm evening glow in search of Le Cours d'Estienne d'Orves.

My counsel had advised I'd encounter an endless array of eateries, dotted around a weave of pedes-

trian streets. And so I sat and observed diners criss-cross the walkers' paradise.

Gaëlle was right — if anywhere in Europe was on the frontline of immigration and integration, and the coalescing of cultures and religions, it was here.

In my brief stroll to find a table, I'd lost count of the ethnic back-grounds in the street mix.

I was also anything but a spectator — being asked for directions, cigarettes, and saluted along the way.

Early the following morning, I ambled down to Le Vieux Port to see the city come alive. On Quai des Belges, the fish market cranked into daily motion with a salty tang, while sightseers boarded ferry boats for trips to Chateau d'If and Les Iles du Frioul, in the city's bay.

Chiselled by Le Mistral wind, a chastening northwesterly gust, and baked by an unforgiving sun that crisps all and sundry, the islands are the driest rocks in France.

Although modest in size, they're worth the trip — to view the city, or

even just spend a few picnic hours.

My first choice, though, was to hop aboard a bus and head for Notre Dame de la Garde. Known affectionately as La Bonne Mere ('the good mother'), this basilica, sitting atop Marseille's highest point, presides over the city, its gleaming golden statue of Madonna and child

a beacon to all at sea, and on land.

Inside, I was struck by the model boats, paintings and surreally personal portraits hung from the ceiling and walls as a testament to the city's gratitude — ex voto offerings to our lady — for the safeguarding of lives, from all sorts of scrapes and near-death experiences.



Above: Marseille's fish market brings the Le Vieux Port to life

It's here you most fully appreciate the city's extent, from l'Estaque in the north — where Cezanne lived and painted — to Les Calanques in the south — the wild and rugged rocky inlets that tumble into the sea — and everything in between; sail boats in the harbour, churches, forts, old and new neighbourhoods.

Backed up against the cracked white limestone of its own mountains, and running flush with the Mediterranean, Marseille has a pre-possessing geography, naturally given to admiring its watery border.

And with the orientation decided for you, and 300 days a year of sunshine, there's little else you can do but enjoy the unique surroundings.

This vantage also allows you consider Marseille's past. A city with a bad rap, the mere mention of its name gets imaginations whirring: 1970s sideburns, leather jackets and chain smoking; a place best avoided for its dockside wheeling and dealing, and general chaos; and out-of-towners, well, standing out.



True, the city has lived through tough times, been crime ridden, filthy and forbidding. Yet, while there may still be shabbiness, and an almost inscrutable coastal mindset, Marseille is so much more.

A closer look reveals a modern metropolis being coiffed and buffed, and readied to don the mantle of European Capital of Culture 2013.

**M**ost everywhere, there's building and refurbishing in train, with architects of international renown all but falling over themselves to etch their names in the city's ancient narrative (remember, the Greeks got the ball rolling here in 6000BC).

And so, instead of appearing like one colossal construction site, the vista is more akin to a city-size canvas being freshened.

Blighted by staggering unemployment since the French colonies folded, Marseille's fortunes have been recently reversed.

And this renewed economic vigour is evidenced in projects such as the Saint Charles Train station, a 19th-century building that's been impressively renovated and reinvented to capture the city's luminosity.

And Paris is closer than ever, a mere three hours away by high-speed train. Throw into the mix how cruise ship visitors have rocketed in recent years — 800,000 last year alone (almost the city's own population) — and you get an idea of how things are progressing.

With more than twice the ground area of Paris, it can easily big-bang, again and again into the future. And that's what's happening right now.

As France's oldest city and largest commercial port, it's got lofty ambitions to be one of Europe's major destinations, and be more than a mere stop on the way to the Riviera.

Descending from La Bonne Mere to La Corniche — Marseille's coastal road — I grabbed a city bike and took off pedalling.

As strips go, it was remarkably calmly driven. Passing by beaches and through villages, my journey entered wilder terrain, bordered



**Above: La Bonne Mere looks out over Marseille**



**Left: the pedestrianised Le Cours d'Estienne d'Orves**

by blanché, cracked rock, furnace-treated by Mother Nature, to the point of almost crumbling.

Sheer, sharp and pointed, yet strangely inviting, I spotted families, couples, even solo travellers, plant themselves randomly then disrobe and swim. Some just paddled, others snorkelled.

Before too long, Callelongue, a cluster of houses, signalled the end of the road and the start of the trek

to the Calanques — the legendary underwater canyons and their turquoise waters.

**R**eturning to the city, as I wheeled across the bridge on Corniche Kennedy, a weather-worn sign wedged between roadside buildings caught my eye.

I dropped the bike and let the narrow gap lead me down its

enchancing stone stair to a hodgepodge of fishermen's cottages below, wonderfully preserved in their original character.

Le Vallon des Auffes, with its kaleidoscopic collection of fishing boats and very own view of the world through the arched bridge above, steals hearts for fun.

You can simply perch yourself and watch the world go by, or tuck into a plate of bouillabaisse — the

local fish stew delicacy — at Chez Jeannot restaurant. Either way, rest your weary limbs here.

Back in the city centre, walking along Le Cours Belsunce, I could hear the rhythmic glottal chug of North-African Arabic exchanges and exclamations on life.

Elsewhere, from the back streets of Le Panier (the oldest district) to Le Cours Julien (the arty part of town), my ears filled with the sounds of lips-smacking cheeks and unhindered conversations.

All part of Marseille's linguistic landscape. Intense, close quartered and so very human, with a distinct southern cadence, that's how Marseille rolls.

What may appear hostile at first — banks of terraced seating, chock-full of coffee and pastis-sipping locals — is anything but.

Just join in. And when you do, you'll have to be made of stone to fend off its charms. Chances are, it'll absorb you and you'll fall for the place.

I certainly did. **W**

## NEED TO KNOW

### GETTING THERE

Aer Lingus (0818 365 044; aerlingus.com) and Ryanair (0818 303 030; ryanair.com) fly from Dublin to Marseille in summer.

The airport shuttle bus (every 20 minutes) travels the 25km to La Gare St Charles in less than half an hour (€8.50 one way).

Taxis cost from €40-€50.

Air France (0818 776 057; airfrance.ie) flies from Dublin via Paris year-round.

### STAYING THERE

The New Hotel (new-hotel.com) in the heart of the city costs €95-€125 for

either a standard single or double room, with a generous breakfast included.

The staff love to chat — in English! (The same goes for the Marseille Tourism office; marseille-tourisme.com.)

### WHEN TO GO

The weather is quite pleasant year round. Avoiding peak times means you can also escape the crowds that descend on the city.

If you're looking for a little commotion, though, visit in July, when France is celebrating Bastille Day (July 14).

## FIVE THINGS TO DO IN MARSEILLE

**1** Lose yourself in the narrow passageways and tiny shops of Le Panier (*right*), the oldest part of the city.

**2** Stop for coffee in Le Cours Julien, a contemporary 'street' courtyard that's graffiti-decorated, tree-lined and chilled out.

**3** Marvel at the city's rooftops and salute La Bonne Mere from La Gare

Saint Charles, the city's train station.

**4** Go diving or canoeing in Les Calanques, underwater canyons with crystal clear waters.

**5** Enjoy an evening beer or pastis (pastaga in this part of France) in Le Longchamps Palace bar, a real Marseille bar true to its original Art Deco style.



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