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As Nice As Nice

28th November 2014

Olivia Greenway visits a city with year-round appeal

Unlike some of its neighbours on the south coast of France, Nice doesn't close down and hibernate like a bear in the winter – it's open all year. Another big plus is that the airport is centrally situated and only a short drive from the city centre. The fact that the city is compact and relatively flat in the central area makes it the perfect place for a winter weekend with some va va voom.

Give the hop-on hop-off city tour (often dismissed as too touristy) a whirl to get a feel for the city. With 14 stops, English commentary, comfortable seats and either one or two day tickets, it's well worth the price for the two-hour tour. If you feel that's overkill, the Petit Train tour is half the price, covers the central area only and lasts nearly an hour. It's a bit bumpy and rather cramped – the clue is in the name – but if you have a child with you, they will love it.

It's worth striding out in Nice, but if walking is not your bag, or you're just feeling lazy, or it's raining (on average it rains only 61 days a year, but you never know...) the tram system is there to save you. Trams run regularly and are not affected by gridlocked traffic, often a problem in popular cities. Buy a ticket from the machine before you board or get a set of ten at a discount. Each ride costs about a euro; you can go as far as you like in 90 minutes. Line One, forming a U-shape and travelling through the city centre is the only service at present, opened in 2007, but more lines are planned, including one to the airport, due to go into service in 2015.

With a sandy and pebbled beach and palm tree fringed beach road, a walk along the Promenade des Anglais is almost obligatory. Stretching from the airport to the Opera House, there are four miles of walking, cycling or skate boarding to enjoy. Almost no building has been allowed along the beach side; the promenade runs parallel and above it, offering uninterrupted views of the ocean. There are palm trees planted along the whole length and then a two-lane carriageway with

the built up area of hotels and restaurants furthest from the sea. Towards the eastern end is The Negresco Hotel, recognisable from its distinctive domed roof and neon sign. Slip in here to sip a (very expensive) cocktail. Opened in 1913, it has been the haunt of royalty and celebrities from the start. Still privately owned and ruled over and lived in by its elderly female owner, The Negresco is synonymous with Nice. Containing priceless historic art and some spectacular modern pieces by Niki Saint de Phalle, the old-fashioned bar (based on a British gentleman's club) or the outside deck if it's fine, will make you feel it's money well spent.

The Museum of Contemporary & Modern Art (MOCAMA) – which has a tram stop all for itself – will fill an hour or two. Entrance is free and over four floors are work by both American and French artists, including Yves Klein, known for his 'blue' work. Born in Nice he died prematurely at 32, leaving a wife and unborn son. If you liked Niki Saint de Phalle's work at The Negresco, there is a huge selection here (donated by the artist) as well as her life story.

There are plenty of comfortable places to rest too. On the top is a roof garden with a couple of sculptures and a wonderful view of the city to the Castle Hill cemetery in the hills. Not far from the museum is one of Nice's squares – Place Garibaldi – with several inviting pavement cafés. Eschew the uninspiring art café and come here instead, to enjoy a well-earned coffee or glass of beer and do a spot of people-watching.

One thing you will notice travelling around Nice is the 'blockhead' building, not far from the Museum of Contemporary Art. Officially named La Tête au Carré (The Square Head) it was designed by sculptor Sacha Sosno and architect Yves Bayard. Not open to visitors – and being the admin centre for the library nearby – it is said to be the only habitable sculpture in the world.

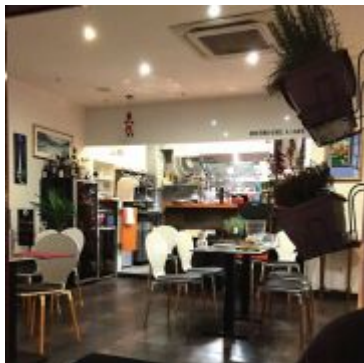
Still on the modern art theme, Henri Matisse lived in Nice from 1917 until his death in 1954. He and his heirs donated many of his works to the museum, making it the largest collection in France. It's a steep 20-minute uphill walk from the tram stop Palais des Expositions, but you will be rewarded with a superb museum set in a red rendered 17th century mansion surrounded by parkland. Admission is free. Guided tours in English are available most afternoons for a modest fee.

Back in the centre, the Promenade du Paillon, set in 30 acres of landscaped public grounds, opened in winter 2013, after a costly two-year regeneration project. Named after the river that runs underneath, and following its course, it has numerous water features to remind us of that – conventional fountains, mist sprays and dancing water spouts. A hundred and fifty years ago, washerwomen would be at the riverside, washing the clothes in the water and then placing them on the steep river slopes to dry in the sun. Nowadays, there are children's play areas and planted beds, replacing the former rather neglected area. Wardens patrol regularly, so it's perfectly safe. Plenty of benches mean it's a fine place to while away a few hours, relaxing with a book or your thoughts.

Place Messena near Galeries Lafayette has fountains and statues on high plinths that change colour at night. It is probably one of the most well known landmarks in the city.

To the east of the city towards the sea (tram stop Cathédrale) is the old town (Vieille Ville) with its cobbled streets, narrow lanes, old churches and pedestrian free areas. Cours Saleya flower market is probably the most famous offering here, just a street behind the seafront. Open every day, there are flowers at one end and fruit and vegetables at the other, and the tantalising smells of the flowers, olives, herbs and spices will overwhelm you. On Mondays, there are also antiques.

You might find the local street food being cooked on a charcoal brazier here. Socca is a type of chickpea pancake, fried until crisp and finished with local olive oil. It should be eaten accompanied with the local rose wine, served icy cold. Ice cream is another speciality of the area (being so close to the Italian border) and, of course, cafés, boutiques and independent food shops are everywhere. By night, the place livens up even more and is crammed with a myriad of evening eating places and bars.



The Bistro del Mare

Excellent French brasseries, restaurants and bars are everywhere in Nice, but special mention must be given to a new establishment on the Avenue de la République near the Acropolis tram stop, that opened in June 2014. Run by a husband and wife team, chef Jean-Marie has turned his back on big kitchens and decided to open his own, Bistro Del Mare. When he says he uses only the best ingredients, he's not joking. Steak is Aberdeen Angus from Scotland, cod is from Norway and garlic sausages are made locally to his recipe. He has a tiny menu, chalked on a board and two sweets he has made that day. Pate sucrée fresh fig tart soaked in pastis must be one of the most memorable desserts ever.

For an inexpensive apartment hotel, High Park, near the Acropolis tram stop ticks all the boxes. For the price that would get you a shoebox elsewhere in Nice, here you have lounge, bedroom, kitchenette and decent shower. Directly opposite is a Carrefour supermarket. And, rather incongruously, a McDonalds. As Peter Sellers might have said, 'Are you med?'.

The really 'med' thing would be not to try Nice if you haven't before. British Airways and EasyJet offer several flights a day from Gatwick; British Airways also flies from Heathrow. Flight time is only two hours. No excuses: for a dose of ooh la la, Nice is just a short hop away.

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