

Artists, Architecture, Beaches. This French Town Has it All, Except Crowds.

SEO HEADLINE Hyères in The South of France Has It All, Except Crowds.

Perched above the Mediterranean on the Cote d’Azur, medieval Hyères was once home to a who’s who of Modernists, and inspires return visits.

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On a hot Sunday morning in July, my sister Adèle and I walked through the narrow entrance to the Villa Noailles in Hyères, the beautiful French medieval town perched above the sea and lying almost midway between Marseilles to the west and St.-Tropez to the east. We were en route to meet Jean-Pierre Blanc, the director of the villa, for a tour around the extraordinary Modernist house, designed by the French architect Robert Mallet-Stevens in the early 1920s.



The villa was designed by the French architect Robert Mallet-Stevens for Charles and Marie-Laure de Noailles, whose friends included Jean Cocteau, Salvador Dalí, Pablo Picasso and Man Ray.





The de Noailles were friends with seemingly every member of the 20th-century avant-garde and the house's design choices reflect their taste.





The Cubist garden with its geometric planters was designed by Gabriel Guévrékian.



The de Noailles asked for a small house, but ended up with 15 bedrooms after an annex was built.

I had long wanted to visit Hyères to see the concrete-and-glass house. It was commissioned by Charles and Marie-Laure de Noailles, a superbly glamorous, deep-pocketed aristocratic pair who were friends and patrons of Jean Cocteau, Salvador Dalí, Pablo Picasso and Man Ray (who immortalized the villa in his 1929 film, “Mystères du Château de Dé”) and seemingly every other member of the early 20th-century avant-garde.

So when I heard that a Parisian acquaintance had moved to the town, and was renting out rooms in a lovely house she had bought almost next door to the Villa Noailles, I immediately booked for my husband and myself, suggesting to Adele that she join us.

The Villa Noailles is the town’s principal tourist destination, but we were thrilled to discover that Hyères and its surroundings are gorgeous, too, with a medieval center, three small offshore islands with wonderful hiking and cycling trails,

beautiful beaches and some 15 wineries making the region's fabled rosé. And unlike the much-frequented tourist spots lining the coast all the way to Monaco, the region seems largely untouched by mass tourism.

That first visit turned into a second — and perhaps more.

A 'small house' for a glamorous couple

We met Mr. Blanc at the house the morning after we first arrived in town, and he told us its history. The villa is now one of France's national cultural centers for contemporary art and home to both the annual Festival International de mode, photographie et accessoires (which Mr. Blanc started in 1986), which includes a photographic exhibition, and to changing exhibitions.

The newly married de Noailles, both devotees of Modernist art and architecture, had first tried to persuade Mies van der Rohe, then Le Corbusier, to design the house, intended as a winter getaway from chilly Paris. Eventually they lit upon Mallet-Stevens, and gave him a brief: "A small house, interesting to live in."





The house was built with an indoor swimming pool, the first one built in France. Now, an annual exhibit of design, photography and accessories spreads throughout many rooms.

Perhaps it was small by their standards, but when the de Noailles moved in, in 1925, the house's Cubist, angular volumes punctuated by huge windows, housed five bedrooms, a reading room, dining room and nursery, as well as a tiny room specifically for flower-arranging. (Hyères was then, and still is, France's major producer of cut flowers.) Later, the de Noailles would add an annex with 10 more bedrooms, a Cubist garden by Gabriel Guévrékian, an indoor swimming pool — the first in France — a gymnasium and a squash court.

Unfortunately, none of the furniture, commissioned from the leading experimental designers of the time — Pierre Chareau, Jean Prouvé, Eileen Gray, Charlotte Perriand, Marcel Breuer among them — remains in the villa. Nor do the paintings and sculptures by Constantin Brancusi, Jacques Lipchitz, Alberto Giacometti, Piet Mondrian and Georges Braque, which adorned its interiors.

But the building itself, with its wonderful, varied interior spaces, filled with light, its unexpected vistas and perfect Modernist blend of functionality and design ingenuity, is lure enough, drawing around 200,000 visitors a year.

Beyond the villa



Hyères's old town is nestled around the 11th-century Castle of St. Bernard.



Visitors can walk from the Villa Noailles through the terraced castle gardens, and then descend to town on winding, narrow streets.

The relative quiet of Hyères might be partly because the old town is not on the sea, but two and a half miles away, nestled around the 11th-century Castle of St. Bernard high up on a hill. The pretty terra-cotta tones of the closely clustered

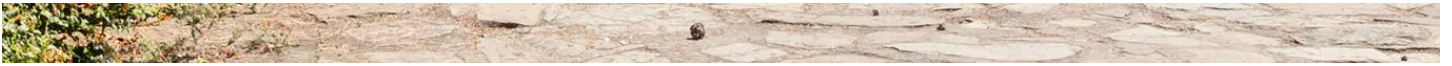
houses, and the winding, narrow streets, overhung by bougainvillea, give way lower down to wider belle époque avenues which are home to the mansions built by the visiting English aristocracy, who flocked to the town after Queen Victoria spent three weeks here in March 1892.





Edith Wharton, the American writer, lived in Castel Ste.-Claire from 1927 to 1937.





The garden at Castel Ste.-Claire is classified as one of France's "remarkable gardens."

Tolstoy, Robert Louis Stevenson, Rudyard Kipling, Joseph Conrad, D.H. Lawrence and Edith Wharton all spent time here. Wharton's home, the Castel Ste.-Claire, is similarly perched high above the town, and is a scenic 10-minute walk from the Villa Noailles. The house is now a National Parks office, but the garden — classified, along with the St. Bernard gardens of the Villa Noailles, as one of France's "remarkable gardens" — is spectacular, filled with subtropical plants, cactuses, roses, bougainvillea and sweet-smelling mimosa, arranged over a series of sloping terraces.

Another 10-minute walk downhill takes you to the Place Massillon, a piazza filled with open-air bars and restaurants, flanked by the 13th-century tower built by the Templars, a religious military order. Tiny streets lead off the square, filled with small shops selling local crafts and wares (the city sponsors a rent-subsidized program to encourage craftspeople to stay in town), tempting bakeries, delicatessens and wine bars.



The spectacular Almanarre beach occupies one side of a thin spit of land running to the Giens Peninsula.

It was too hot in mid-July to spend much time in the center, so we headed to the spectacular Almanarre beach, a few miles south of town, occupying one side of a thin spit of land running to the Giens Peninsula. On the other side of the narrow road lies the Etang des Pesquiers, where salt was panned until 1995, and now home to hundreds of flamingos. Almanarre beach is long enough to feel uncrowded even in midsummer, and it's a famed windsurfing spot. It wasn't windy when we went, but if it is, locals advise heading to the white sand Plage de la Capte, on the other side of the peninsula.

On another day we went to the pretty Plage du Pellegrin, a public beach about a 20-minute drive away, behind which a lovely open-air restaurant, Café Léoube, rents huge sun beds in the dappled shade of pine trees; there is also a housewares shop, olive groves and a wine estate.

Even though we couldn't get a table at the restaurant, we loved the place and made a point to return on our next visit. This time, we managed to secure a reservation, at the cafe, where for lunch one day we ate delicious thin-crust pizzas and simple but stylish main dishes, like fish with spring vegetables and lamb with brocciu, a Corsican cheese, fresh herbs and walnuts, accompanied by homegrown wines and olive oil. (You can have items from a lighter menu, as well as cocktails and wine, served at your sun bed; not a terrible option.)

Serendipitously, our second visit coincided with the local Fête de St. Paul, at which copious amounts of soupe au pistou, a summer vegetable soup laced with a pungent basil and garlic purée, are consumed by locals on the village square. We joined a communal table, and were warmly welcomed, with our neighbors offering us some of the snacks they had brought to eat while waiting for the soup to be served.



The Place Massillon is flanked by the 13th-century tower built by the Templars, a religious military order.



Tiny streets lead off the square, filled with small shops and stands.

The next day we took the easy 20-minute ferry ride from the Giens Peninsula to the picturesque Isle de Porquerolles. There are almost no cars on the island, but you can hire bicycles at the port, and bike across the many paths that snake between one side of the island and another. We opted to walk the short distance to the Villa Carmignac, a beautiful exhibition space and landscaped garden opened in 2018 by Edouard Carmignac, a French investment banker and serious art collector. The 21,000-square-foot space is cool and serene, admitting only 50 visitors at a time, who are asked to take off their shoes before entering the exhibition. We saw a fascinating show, “The Infinite Woman,” featuring 60 female artists, then walked to the nearby Courtade beach for a cooling swim.

We had wanted to go for dinner to Le Mas du Langoustier, a picturesque small hotel and restaurant on the other side of the island, but couldn’t get a table, so returned to the mainland, and had an excellent meal at the charming La Bouillabaisse, overlooking the sea on the western edge of the Giens Peninsula. A 42- euro menu (about \$48) offered a choice of starter, main course and dessert,

including a delicious fish soup, grilled sea bream, steak or calamari in a parsley sauce, and molten chocolate cake, fruit or cheese to finish. (If you want to eat the full-scale titular dish, be warned that you need to order it two days in advance.)

Another day, we discovered the adorable Hotel de la Mer, a small hotel with a sophisticated restaurant owned by the Hyères-born chef Tom Cariano. Three miles outside Hyères, the simple white-fronted building is surrounded by palm trees and is a five-minute walk down to the beach. You can walk along its sandy length to the seaside village of Ayguade, where locals were downing mussels and chips, washed down by rosé and beer at the end of another long beach day.

Next time, we're doing that.

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