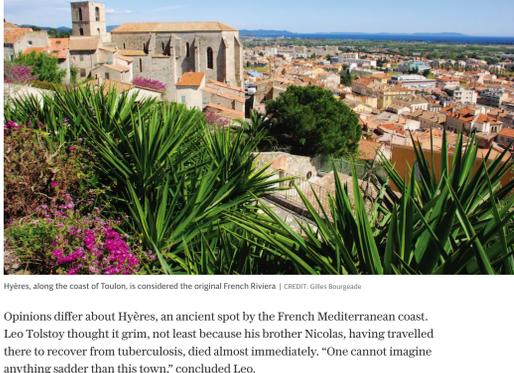


# The Cote d'Azur town that just became a global destination

Hyères once attracted the cream of the British crop – now a new museum means it will enjoy its place in the sun once more

By Anthony Peregrine, DESTINATION EXPERT  
27 November 2021 - 12:00pm

Related Topics: France, Cote D'Azur  
Social sharing icons: Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Email, Print, Comment



Hyères, along the coast of Toulon, is considered the original French Riviera | CREDIT: Gilles Bourgoade

Opinions differ about Hyères, an ancient spot by the French Mediterranean coast. Leo Tolstoy thought it grim, not least because his brother Nicolas, having travelled there to recover from tuberculosis, died almost immediately. "One cannot imagine anything sadder than this town," concluded Leo.

On the other hand, Queen Victoria – who spent a month there in 1892 – led elite Britons in considering Hyères pretty wonderful. These were the days when winter was high seaside season – summer being deemed too ferocious for fragile northern constitutions, regal or otherwise. Hyères was the first in France to get the hang of this top-end foreign tourism, before Nice, Biarritz or Cannes. Our rich and titled forebears rolled in mob-handed from the later 18th century, initially for the good of their health. Southern climes were thought good for chest ailments. Granted, they didn't do much for the Tolstoys, but the north-to-south surge continued because the attempt to get better was more agreeable on the Med than, say, in the Midlands.

Hyères had a Hotel d'Angleterre before the French Revolution. Anne Pitt, sister of prime minister William, and the future George IV visited. And, as a wannabe elite Briton, I'm absolutely with them. Along the coast from Toulon, this is an excellent spot – elegant, alive with a sense of centuries, and often warm, with light unfiltered and considerable beauty all around. Grand, in short, for wintering.

And it gets better yet from today with the inauguration of the town's Museum of Culture and of Landscapes. The title is cumbersome – that's the French way – but the museum is a key cultural event in a country that, in recent times, hasn't put much serious cash into provincial arts. Or, as a Hyères official put it: "No one else is opening new museums right now."

The aim is to track changes over time in the region's landscape – and also changes in the way it has been perceived. If that sounds worthy, it's because it is worthy. But there's a place for proper worthiness in a decent break. (Should you prefer mulled wine, Styrofoam reindeer and that sort of unspeakable frivolity, Hyères's Christmas market is nearby. It opened on Friday.)



Museum of Culture and of Landscapes occupies the former Hyères branch of the Bank of France | CREDIT: Communication Ville d'Hyères

Meanwhile, the museum setting – the former Hyères branch of the Bank of France – suits the purpose. These are be-pillared neo-classical premises from the days when banks were bastions of rectitude, their managers men of standing. They've been opened out and, with glass all over the place, lightened up, as the modern world requires. But some safes remain in memory of opulent times, as do deposit boxes where rich people stashed whatever rich people stash. (They're empty now; I checked.)

The fine art show is twofold. Upstairs, a permanent exhibition covers the transformation of the landscape wrought by man, from Greek settlers through to Hyères' Renaissance hours as France's citrus fruit HQ. Catherine de Médici, her son Charles IX and, later, the Sun King himself, all showed up in town for the oranges. Simultaneously, the vast salt pans along Hyères's southern peninsula were working flat out as caught in the local artist Louis Garcin's 1893 Salt Harvest. More worrying is his portrait of a big fellow artist sketching on the back of a donkey far too small to carry him. The animal doesn't realise it's about to collapse.

That said, the permanent show, though rich enough, really acts as an hors-d'oeuvre for the temporary exhibition, Facing The Sun (Face Au Soleil) on the ground floor, to March 27 next year. Essentially, we are looking at the landscape – and the Mediterranean light – in the different ways adopted by different artists from the 1850s to 1950s. Thus we travel from naturalism of inland panoramas enlivened by goatherds and washerwomen, on to the later 19th century when fleeting, vibrant light itself became the obsession. Here are Renoir, Bonnard, Henri-Edmond Cross and Paul Signac, the last two still giving me a headache with their damned dotty pointillism.



The work of Henri-Edmond Cross features in a temporary exhibition: Facing the Sun (Face Au Soleil) | CREDIT: Pierre-Sigisane Azema/Collection Musée de l'Annonciade, Saint-Tropez

Engrossing, mind, how perceptions change, through to a more cerebral 1957 Picasso pigeon picture borrowed from Barcelona – and Dufy's 1952, all-crammed-together Public Garden in Hyères. (Using it as a guide, you'd never find the entrance.) Chagall's Le Soleil Jaune pulsates with the artist's apparently naive energy. When Hyères offers me my pick of the exhibition, this is the one I'll take home.

And so, 90 minutes later, you emerge into the museum garden – a fine spread of the Med's greatest later-hits, garrigue through exotica – your cue, perhaps, to head out into the real thing. Who knows, you might prefer the opinion on the town and its surrounds of Robert Louis Stevenson, once a temporary resident, over Leo Tolstoy's.

"I was only happy once," wrote Stevenson, "that was at Hyères." I've been happy in lots of places, but Hyères is right up there.

## Exploring Hyères and its environs

### The old town: a mixed-up marvel

Start with a steep hike up through the old town. At the top, the huge Villa Noailles gets a lot of attention, not least for its architecture. Its white hyper-rational 1920s combination of cubes, and other straight lines excites many but looks to me like a minor naval station. Within, contemporary exhibitions recall a heyday when the villa hosted pretty much every artist making a noise in the 1920s and 1930s: Miro, Klee, Braque, Cocteau and Man Ray, among them. At the villa, and with the help of Dali, Luis Buñuel wrote his film L'Age-d'Or, banned for decades as both subversive and blasphemous.

While up here, have a look at the medieval château – there's not much left, but the views are grand – and at the Castel Sainte Claire, a former convent where Edith Wharton lived, and tended extraordinary hillside gardens, from 1920 to 1937. She'd just won the Pulitzer prize for The Age Of Innocence. Great writers were thick on the ground in Hyères. Kipling, Conrad and Aldous Huxley showed up and, somewhat down the hill, on Rue Victor Basch, stands the modest Villa Solitude – a chalet, really – where Mr and Mrs Robert Louis Stevenson lived from 1883 to 1884 on the proceeds of Treasure Island.



There's an authentic feel to Hyères' sinuous old town streets | CREDIT: Haria Melis / Eyedea

Around this time, and authors aside, Hyères throbbed with Britons. We required golf courses, a race course, tennis and badminton courts, luxury hotels, tea rooms, reading rooms and three Anglican churches. English doctors and dentists prospered, as did local pharmacies selling, among other things, an anti-dandruff lotion called Royal Windsor. Between the wars, Hyères lost out to other Côte-d'Azur spots – but that simply means that it has ceded less than most to modern sea-sidery. The cut-flower trade remains a vital alternative earner and there's a real feel to the sinuous old town streets.

### Porquerolles Island: the artists' favourite

Hop on a 67 bus for the 40-minute ride down the Gien peninsula to La Tour Fondue ([reseau-mistral.com](http://reseau-mistral.com); £2.40 return), then take a 30-minute ferry to Porquerolles Island ([ly-tvm.com](http://ly-tvm.com); £15 return in winter). Car-free and mainly wild, the island is overwhelmed in summer to the point where high-season access is now limited. In winter, however, they are delighted to see you.



Porquerolles Island: a snapshot of the Riviera many artists came to paint | CREDIT: sergio-pazzano/500pxphoto

You may roam, or cycle, the tracks, forest and headlands, the vineyards and barely-touched island beaches as if you owned the place. Hire an e-bike and, from the island's sole village, whoosh up to the 300ft cliff above l'Endienne creek. Here's a concentration of the best of Med land- and sea-scapes: rocks, grey-green vegetation, distinct blues of sea and sky and the winter sun spangling the water, creating paths of light sufficient for saviours to stroll upon. This is the Riviera many artists came to paint before, on the mainland, apartment blocks got in the way.

### Olbia: a very mini Pompeii

Back on the peninsula, the vast Almanarre beach assembles all those excited by wind-blown pursuits, kite-surfing and the rest. Take a walk along the sandbar, then you need to pursue inquiries into Hyères' origins. Almost on the beach, a wonderful archaeological site introduces us to Olbia, a township founded in 325BC by Greek settlers from their nearby HQ of Marseilles. Within its ramparts, Olbia thrived as a port – and a fort, defending the sea lanes from the Unsubstantiated.

In 49BC, Caesar's men invaded, so Olbia went Roman, becoming a centre of commerce and, with class thermal baths, a tourist destination. Olbia was abandoned around the 17th century, then colonised by a Cistercian nunnery in the Middle Ages before being abandoned once again and given over to agriculture.



Olbia is the only bona fide Greco-Roman site in France | CREDIT: Hyères tourisme - Julie Guimier

The terrific thing is that one can read this story on the site – which I'll characterise as a mini (OK, very mini) Pompeii. Excavation below the farmland has uncovered elements of the Greek settlement, and also of the Roman shops and bigger houses built upon the Greek bases. Near what was the small town's centre stands a decorated counter unearthed on site – from a tavern – and looking as if it might have been created last Tuesday.

The wandering is engaging. Olbia is the only bona fide Greco-Roman site in France. To appreciate it, you'll need the audio-guide or a tour. Through winter, to next April 1, you'll have to arrive in a group of at least 10. They don't do individual visits. But ask around the hotel, or at the tourist office, and you might muster additional companions ([hyeres-tourisme.com](http://hyeres-tourisme.com); £3).

## How to do it

**Getting there:** Fly to Marseilles, take a shuttle bus to the station, then a train to Hyères. Bus and train together take about two and a half hours. Or take the (much less frequent) FlixBus from the airport to Toulon ([flixbus.fr](http://flixbus.fr)), then the N°39 bus onward to Hyères ([reseau-mistral.com](http://reseau-mistral.com))

**Staying there:** Try the utterly charming Castel Pierre Lisse B&B (0033 494 311 18; [castelpierrelisse.fr](http://castelpierrelisse.fr), doubles from £88) or the comfortably predictable, four-star Mercure Centre (0033 494 65 03 04; [all.accor.com](http://all.accor.com), doubles from £71). For more inspiration on where to stay, read Telegraph Travel's complete guide to the [best hotels in the Cote d'Azur](#).

**Eating there:** Le Jardin for lovely gardens (obviously) and fine Provençal food, the Taj Mahal if you crave a rogan josh (0033 483 99 14 04; menus from £16)

News Headlines: News stories personally picked just for you. Sign up button.

Related Topics: France, Cote D'Azur. Social sharing icons: Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Email, Print, Comment.

The Telegraph values your comments but kindly requests all posts are on topic, constructive and respectful. Please review our [commenting policy](#).

Show comments

## France latest

- The secret to choosing a snow-sure ski resort this winter
The 20 places you must visit in 2023
The 50 best family-friendly hotels in France
26 miles, 20 glasses of wine: What it's like to run the world's booziest marathon
Where the travel experts and editors are going on holiday in 2023
The world's greatest ski resort (according to science)

## More from The Telegraph

- Elgin Marbles could soon be returned to Greece in landmark deal
Rishi Sunak puts maths at the heart of this vision for Britain
Students launch protest over university's 'greenwashing' Greta Thunberg statue
The best new cars being released in 2023, according to the experts
Shallow Varadkar couldn't keep up the Brexit hatred
Labour split opens over Wes Streeting's call for NIS to 'reform or die'

## Visit France

Best hotels in Nice, Best hotels in Marseille, Best hotels in Lyon. Explore hotels that have been tried, tested and rated by our experts. View all button.

Voucher Codes: The latest offers and discount codes from popular brands on Telegraph Voucher Codes. Includes Travelodge, easyjet, National Trust, TUI, Hotels.com, and Crystal Ski promo codes.